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ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

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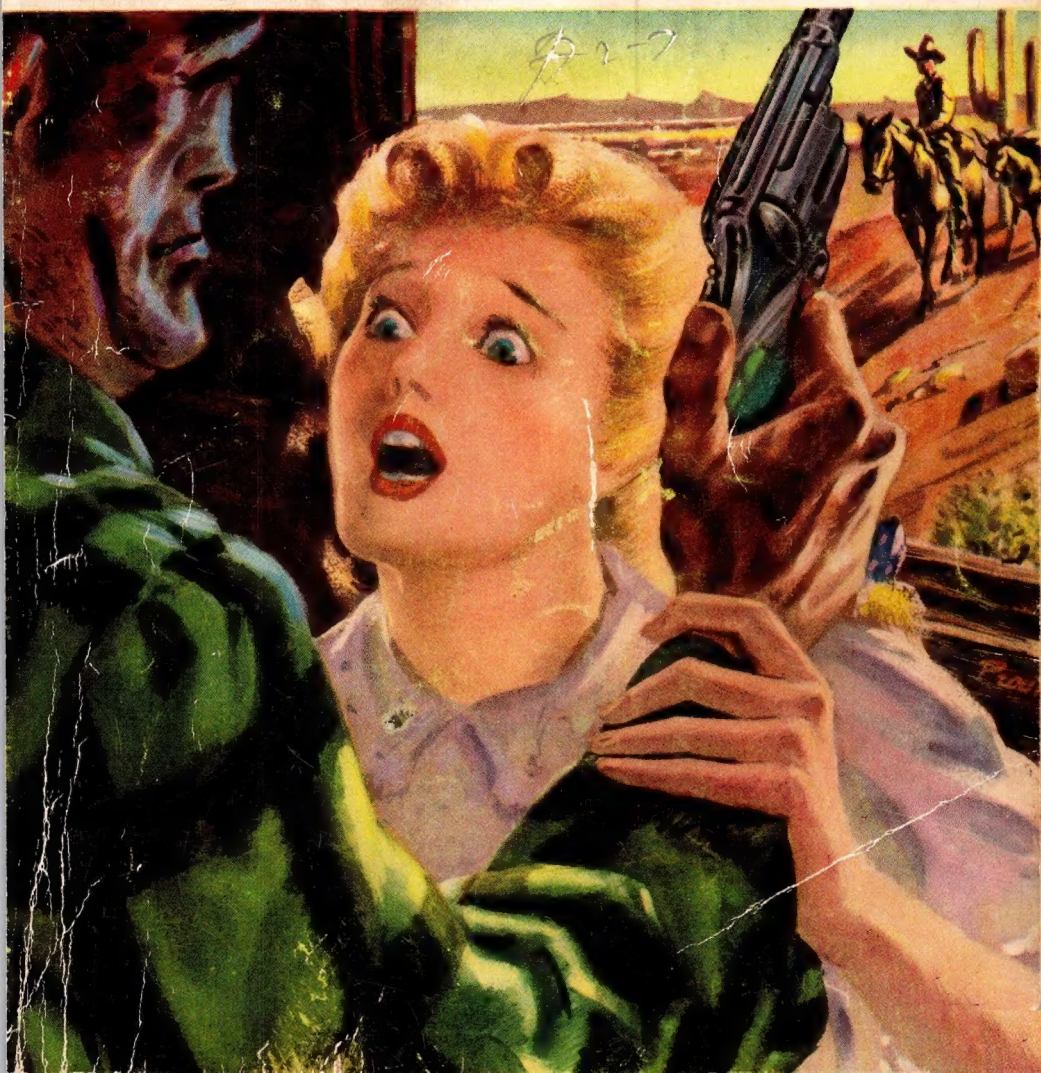
TWIN SOMBREROS BY ZANE GREY (MAGAZINE ABRIDGMENT)



"It's the left one, I'm sure—look."

Twin Sombreros, Chap. 15

ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

Vol. 3, No. 1—March, 1949

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THIS MONTH'S MAGAZINE ABRIDGMENT

HUNGRY AND SADDLE-WEARY, *Brazos Keene, range-rider extraordinary, accepts the advice of a stranger and bunks down in a deserted cabin near Las Animas. He awakes in the morning to find that he has been sleeping under a roof which also shelters a corpse! And, before he can saddle up and* vamose, *he gets taken into custody by a hanging posse.*

For a while, what has been Brazos's dream of a felicitous visit to the scene of earlier and happier days for him turns into a nightmare. Raine Surface, the most powerful cattleman of the region, displays a disquieting eagerness to have Brazos strung up, and Deputy Sheriff Bodkin seems all too willing to oblige. But Brazos manages to get out of this predicament with the aid of a fellow Texan, and later on walks out of the sheriff's office determined to get to the bottom of the whole mysterious business.

That determination is further fired when the gun-slinging cowboy meets the lovely twin sisters of the murdered man. Their brother dead, their father cheated out of his great ranch by the power-mad Surface, the twins welcome Brazos as the one man who can restore the lost fortunes of the Neece family. They are named Jan and June—Jan because she's cold, 'tis said—and Brazos, who finds that he can't tell them apart, soon falls into a state of romantic confusion.

Seeking to drive Surface into the open, Brazos accuses him of being the big wheel of the rustler gangs that have been plaguing all of eastern Colorado. His forthright talk results in Surface's setting an intricate trap—the same kind he has used successfully before—baited with a beautiful girl known as Bess Syvertsen. In one suspenseful scene after another Brazos Keene out-maneuvers the would-be killers, and when the trap is finally sprung the blond cowboy punctuates his leather-slapping response with gun flame. But before he is through with Las Animas, Brazos's heavy black Colts clear their holsters still another time, making their owner an outlaw—an outlaw followed down the trail by one of the lovely twins. Which one? Even Brazos isn't sure!

B W 3-52

The April issue of ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

will bring you a magazine abridgment of

Milford Glanby

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Zane Grey's intensely dramatic and colorful sequel to

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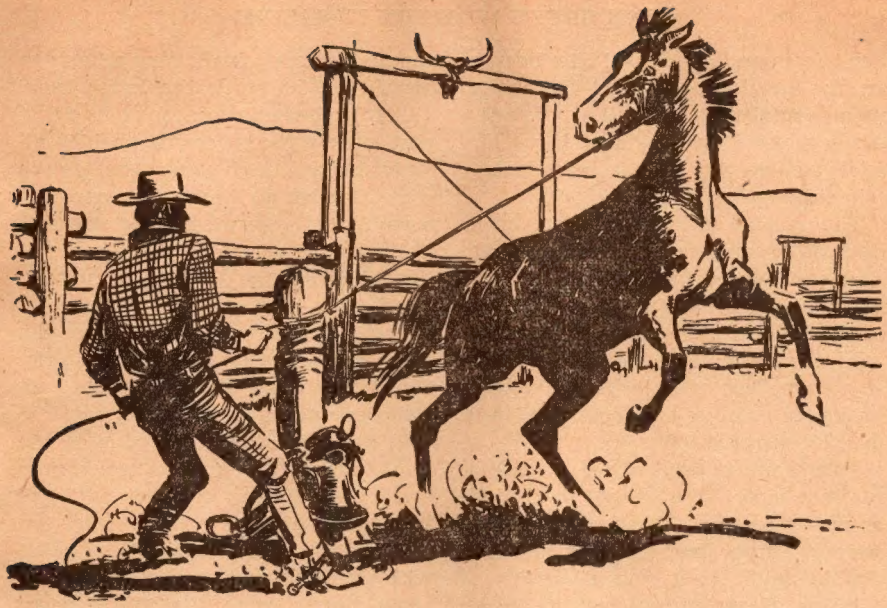

Twin Sombreros

By ZANE GREY

Chapter One

Necktie Party

THE sun hung gold and red above the sawtoothed snow-tipped ramparts of the Colorado Rockies. On a high bluff across the sunset-flushed Purgatory River a group of Indians sat their mustangs watching the slow, winding course of a railroad train climbing toward the foothills, fearful of this clattering, whistling monster on wheels that might spell doom to the red man. Had they not seen train after train loaded with buffalo hides steam eastward across the plains?

A lithe rider, dusty and worn, mounted on a superb bay horse, halted on the south side of the river to watch the Indians.

"Utes, I reckon," he said, answering to the habit of soliloquy that loneliness had fostered in him. "Like the Kiowas they shore die hard. Doggone me if I

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don't feel sorry for them! The beaver an' the buffalo aboot gone! The white man rangin' with his cattle wherever grass grows! Wal, Reddies, if yu air wise, yu'll go way back in some mountain valley an' stay there."

The rumble of the railroad train died away and the black, snakelike string of cars wound out of sight between bold gray bluffs. A moment longer the Indians lingered, their lean and wild shapes silhouetted against the sky, then they wheeled their ragged mustangs and disappeared in red dust clouds over the ridge.

"Wal, come to think aboot it," mused the lone rider, "they're not so bad off as me— No money. No job. No home. Ridin' a grub line, an' half starved. Nothin' but a hawss an' a gun."

Brazos Keene's usual cool and reckless insouciance had suffered a blight. The outcast state he had bitterly avowed was far from new to him. It had been his fate for years to ride the trails from cow camp to ranch, from one cattle town to another. He could not stay long in one place. Always he had been driven. Wherefore the sadness of the hour scarcely had its source in this cowboy wandering.

He put a slow hand inside his open vest to draw forth a thick letter, its fresh whiteness marred by fingerprints and sundry soiled spots. He had wept over that letter. Marveling again, with a ghost of the shock which had first attended sight of that beautiful handwriting, he reread the postmark and the address. *Lincoln, New Mexico, May 3, 1880. Mr. Brazos Keene, Latimer, Colorado, c/o Two-bar X Ranch.* The Latimer postmark read a day later.

"My Gawd, but this heah railroad can fetch a man trouble pronto," he complained and, swallowing a lump in his throat, he stuck the letter back. "What in the hell made me go into thet post office for? Old cowboy habit! Always lookin' for letters thet never come. I wish to Gawd this one had been like all the others. But aw no! Holly Ripple remembers me—has still the old faith in me— An' she named her boy Brazos—after me."

Lost in memory, Brazos saw the green river brawling between its gray banks where the willows had a reddish tinge not all from the sunset. The cold keen air, the fresh odor of the swollen river, the faint color along the brush-lined banks told that the time was early spring.

"Only five years!" mused the rider, with unseeing eyes on the west. "Five years since I rode along heah down the old trail from Don Carlos's Rancho— An' what have I done with my life?"

A savage shake of his head was Brazos's answer to that disturbing query, as also it was a passionate repudiation of memory. He rode on down the river trail toward Las Animas. He did not know how far it was in to town. His horse was lame and weary. This stretch along the Purgatory was not prolific of cow camps; nevertheless, Brazos hoped to run into one before nightfall.

"Purgatory, huh?" muttered Brazos somberly. "Wal, the son-of-a-gun Spaniard thet named this heah creek shore hit it plumb center. Purgatory? River of Lost Souls! Doggone if thet doesn't fit me proper. I'm shore a ridin' fool —a gone goslin'—a lost soul!"

The trail worked up from the river to an intersection with a road. In the gathering darkness, Brazos's quick eye caught sight of three horsemen riding

out from a clump of dead trees which only partly obscured a dark cabin. The riders wheeled back, apparently thinking Brazos had not seen them.

"Ump-um," muttered Brazos to himself. "Yu gotta be cuter'n thet, my buckos— Now, I just wonder what'n hell kind of a move yu call thet." He reined his horse some rods before passing in front of that clump of trees.

Brazos heard a sibilant hissing *"hold thar!"* and a sound that seemed like a gloved hand slapped on metal. A hoarse voice, thick-tongued from liquor, rasped low. Then came a young high-pitched answer: "But Bard, I'm not risking—" The violent gloved hand cut that speech short. To Brazos the name that had been mentioned sounded like Bard, but it might have been Bart or even Brad.

"Hey, riders," called Brazos curtly. "I seen yu before yu seen me."

After a moment of silence, Brazos heard the word "Texan" whispered significantly. Then one of the three rode out.

"What if you did, stranger?" he asked.

"Nothin'. I just wanted yu to know all riders ain't blind an' deaf."

Brazos's interrogator halted just so far away that his features were indistinguishable. But Brazos registered the deep matured voice, the sloping shoulders, the bull neck.

"Thar's been some holdups along hyar lately," he said.

"Ahuh. An' thet's why yu acted so queer?"

"Queer?"

"Shore. I said queer."

"Playin' safe, stranger."

"Yeah? Wal, if yu took me for a bandit yu're way off."

"Glad to hear thet—an' who might you be?"

"I'm a grub-line-ridin' cowboy. I'm tired an' hungry, an' my hawss is lame."

"Whar you from?"

"Texas."

"Hell! A deaf man could tell thet. Whar you ridin' from?"

"Montana. Straight as a crow flies."

"An' whar you makin' for?"

"Mister, if I wasn't hungry an' tired I wouldn't like yore pert questions. I'm not goin' anywhere in particular. How far to Las Animas?"

"All-night drill fer a tired hoss."

"Any cow camp near?"

"Nope. Nearest ranch is Twin Sombreros, three miles from town."

"Excuse me for askin'," went on Brazos with sarcasm, "but do yu fellers belong to an ootfit thet'll feed a hungry cowpuncher?"

"My boss hasn't any use fer grub-line riders."

"Yu don't say. Wal, I reckon I don't eat. Small matter. But would yu tell me if there's any grass heahaboots for my hawss?"

"Good grass right hyar, stranger. An' you can bunk in the old cabin thar."

"Thanks," returned Brazos dryly.

The burly rider turned to his silent companions, just discernible in the gloom. "Come on, men. If we're makin' Lamar tonight we got to rustle."

The couple joined him and they rode by Brazos too swiftly for him to distinguish anything. They took to the north, soon passing out of sight. Brazos kept staring in the direction they had gone.

"Surly hombre," he soliloquized, ponderingly. "He wanted to be shore I *was* a stranger. Now I wonder why? An' if he didn't stop one of them from

takin' a pot shot at me, I'll eat my sombrero. An' thet one I heahed clear an' shore—'Bard, I'm not risking!' Thet's a stumper. Thet hombre was goin' to bore me. What wasn't he riskin'? Why shore it was my ridin' in on them. Doggone queer! But he had been hittin' the bottle. I heahed liquor in his voice. An' it's no use tryin' to figger oot any deal thet has to do with redeye."

The cabin proved to be close at hand. Brazos peeped in the open door. It was pitch dark inside and smelled dry. He removed saddle and bridle from the bay and turned him loose. Brazos carried his paraphernalia inside and deposited it upon the floor. He felt in his pockets for matches. He had none. Then he groped around, hands outstretched, until he bumped into a bench made of boughs. This, with his saddle blankets, would furnish a better bed than many to which he had of late been accustomed.

Some time in the night he awoke. At first he imagined he had awakened from a vague grotesque dream, details of which he could not remember. Usually a light sleeper, he thought nothing of being aroused. But after a moment he felt that this was different. And he attended to outside sensations.

He heard a *drip*, *drip*, *drip* of rain on the floor. Evidently the roof of this shack leaked. A low moaning wind swept by under the cabin eaves. The night was so black that he could not locate either door or window. *Drip—drip—drip*—slowly the dropping sounds faded in his consciousness.

From that hour on he slept fitfully, restlessly, harassed by strange dreams. One by one these increased in their morbid vagaries until finally a ghastly climax brought him awake, wet with cold sweat.

Dawn was at hand. Through the window he discerned a faint blue of sky. Apparently the weather had cleared. But all of a sudden—*drip—drip—drip*. The drops of rain water were slow and heavy. They spattered on the earthen floor. It was now light enough in the cabin to make out a ladder leading up to a loft.

All at once a cold chill crept over his skin. That dank odor, dominating the pungent dry smell of the cabin, assailed his nostrils. *Drip—drip—drip!* Brazos was wide awake now, on the verge of being startled by he knew not what. In a single action, he slid upright off the bench.

That drip came from the loft just about the center of the cabin. Brazos could not see the drops, but by their sound, he located them—stretched out his upturned palm. *Spat!* Despite his steely nerve the heavy wet contact on his hand gave him a shock. He strode to the light of the doorway, there to confirm his suspicion.

"Blood!" he ejaculated, his eyes fixed on the red splotch in his palm. "Cold an' thick— There's a daid man up in thet loft. Aha! them three hombres last night! Brazos, I reckon yu better be rustlin' oot of heah pronto."

Hurrying back to the bench, Brazos wiped the blood on his saddle blankets, and carried these with his saddle to the door. Dawn had given way to daylight with a ruddy tinge in the eastern sky. And at that moment a clattering roar of hoofs swept up like a storm before the wind, and a group of riders pulled their horses to a sliding halt before the cabin.

"Ahuh. Jig aboot up! I savvy," muttered Brazos, and stepping out of the door he flung down the saddle and blankets to stand at attention. He

needed not to see the rifles to grasp that this was a posse and that he was the object of their onslaught upon the cabin.

"Hands up, cowboy!" came a harsh command.

"They're up," replied Brazos laconically, suiting action to words. The leveled guns and grim visages of this outfit showed that they meant business. Brazos had seen many posses and had been a member of not a few. Most of these riders had the cowboy stripe, but some of them, particularly the harsh-voiced, hard-faced leader, appeared to be matured men.

"Pile off, Stuke, an' you, Segel," ordered this leader. Whereupon two riders flung themselves out of their saddles to rush at Brazos from each side. "Grab his guns! Search him. Take everythin'."

Brazos was quick to recognize real peril. He surveyed the group of horsemen to ascertain that they were all strangers to him and no different from any hard, determined outfit of Westerners. In a moment, he made certain that not one of them had ever seen him. He had not been in that vicinity for six years, which was a long time on the range.

"Bodkin," called a rider from within the cabin, his voice queer.

"What! You found him?" queried the leader sharply.

"Yes. Up in the loft. Send someone in to help us let him down."

Brazos listened with strained ears to the sounds and husky voices inside the cabin. Presently three of the posse came out of the cabin, carrying the body, which they deposited upon the grass. Brazos's startled gaze bent down upon a handsome youth scarcely twenty years old, evidently a cowboy from his garb, dark-haired and dark-skinned. He had been shot through the back. All his pockets were turned inside out.

"Allen Neece!" burst out Bodkin in surprise.

"Shot in the back."

"Robbed!"

"Purty cold-blooded, I'd say."

"Bod, I reckon we might jest as wal string this hombre up."

These and various other comments greeted Brazos's ears, and drew from Bodkin the harsh decree:

"Cowboy, you're under arrest."

"Hell! I'm not blind or deaf," retorted Brazos sarcastically. "May I ask who yu air?"

"I'm Deputy Sheriff Bodkin of Las Animas, actin' under Kiskadden's orders."

"An' what's yore charge?"

"Murder."

Brazos laughed outright. "My Gawd, man, air yu loco? Do I look like a hombre who'd shoot a boy in the back, rob him, an' hang aboot waitin' for an outfit to come get me?"

"You can't never tell what a cowboy will do from his looks."

"Aw, the hell yu cain't," replied Brazos contemptuously, with a piercing glance of scorn flashing from Bodkin to his men. "What kind of Westerners air yu?"

Brazos's scornful stand, his cool nerve in the face of a critical situation obviously impressed some of the riders.

"Bod, I'd recommend a fair trial fer this feller," said one.

"Bod, you cain't hang this Texan on such heahsay evidence," advised a slow-spoken member.

"Why not? Cause you're a Texan yourself?"

"Wal, as to thet, Texans, whether

they're guilty of crime or not, ain't very often hanged. Personally, I reckon this cowboy is innocent as I am of this murder. An' mebbe I'm not the only one. If you hang him, Kiskadden will be sore. An' if by any chance he ain't guilty an' it comes oot—wal, it'd kind of heat up the stink thet hasn't died oot cold yet."

During the brief duration of that quiet speech Brazos gauged both men—the sandy-haired, sallow-faced Texan whose looks and words were significant—and the swarthy Bodkin, dark-browed, shifty of gaze, chafing under the other's cool arraignment of the case, and intense with some feeling hardly justified by the facts presented.

"All right, Inskip," rejoined Bodkin, with suppressed anger. "We'll take him before Kiskadden. Prod him to his hoss, men. An' if he bolts, blow his towhead off."

Brazos's captors shoved him forward. Bay had been found and saddled. He did not like this crowd and pulled at his bit, held hard by one of the posse. Brazos mounted. The body of the boy Neece was lifted over a saddle and covered with a slicker. The rider of this horse essayed to walk, which gave Brazos the impression that Las Animas was not far distant. Presently the cavalcade started toward the road, with Brazos riding in the center.

They traveled on at a slow trot and at length reached a site strangely familiar to Brazos. It was the head of the valley. A long, low, red-roofed, red-walled adobe ranch house stood upon the north bank of the river, and below it, where the cottonwoods trooped into the valley, spread barns and sheds, corrals and racks in picturesque confusion. The droves of horses in the pastures, the squares of alfalfa, and the herds of cattle dotting the valley and the adjacent slopes attested to the prosperity of some cattle baron.

"Doggone!" ejaculated Brazos in the enthusiastic appreciation of his kind. "Whose ootfit is thet?"

Inskip, the Texan, riding second on Brazos's left, took it upon himself to reply.

"Twin Sombreros Ranch," he replied, his dry drawl significant of something more than information. "Operated now by Raine Surface, runnin' eighty thousand haid of the Twin Sombreros brand. Used to belong to Abe Neece, father of the daid boy we're packin' to town. Abe is livin' still, but a broken man over the loss of thet ranch."

It so happened that when the cavalcade reached the crossroad to the ranch a sextet of riders, some of them cowboys, rode down from above to halt their mounts at sight of the posse. Brazos espied two young women riders and he burned both inwardly and outwardly. His proud, fiery nature rebelled at the indignity Bodkin had forced upon him.

"What's this, Bodkin?" demanded the leader.

"Mornin', Mr. Surface," replied Bodkin with both importance and servility. "We been out arrestin' a cowboy. Charged with murder. An' I've got the proofs on him."

"Murder! You don't say? Who?"

"No other than Abe Neece's boy—young Allen Neece."

"Open up here!" ordered Surface, and in another moment a few feet of unobstructed lane intervened between the rancher and Brazos Keene.

For Brazos it was one of those instinctively potent meetings of which his life on the ranges had been so full. He turned from his long glance at the

two girls, the older of whom had hair as red as flame, a strikingly beautiful face, with blue-green eyes just now dilated in horror.

"Who are you?" demanded Surface with intense curiosity, not one iota of which denoted sympathy.

Brazos gave the rancher a long stare. Among Brazos's gifts was the rare one of an almost superhuman perspicuity. The time had long passed in his eventful career when he distrusted that peculiar faculty. Surface fell within a category of Westerners far removed from the open-faced, eagle-eyed, great-hearted pioneers whom Brazos revered.

"Wal, who I am is shore none of yore business," replied Brazos coldly.

"Cowboy, I'm Raine Surface, an' I have a good deal to say with the business of this county," returned the rancher, plainly nettled.

"I reckon. Do you happen to be in cahoots with this fourflush, Deputy Bodkin?"

The sharp unexpected query disconcerted Surface and elicited a roar from Bodkin.

"I put Kiskadden in office," said the rancher stiffly, putting forward a fact Brazos could see no reason for mentioning. "I recommended to the Cattlemen's Association that we appoint deputies to help rid this range of desperadoes an' rustlers—an' rowdy cowboys."

"Wal, Mr. Surface, yu shore impress me powerful," drawled Brazos scornfully.

"You insolent ragamuffin of a Texan!" fumed Surface, evidently resenting his failure to be given due importance.

"See heah, Surface," flashed Brazos, his piercing tenor stiffening his hearers. "I am a Texan an' one of the breed thet don't forget insult or injustice. You're a hell of a fine Westerner to act as an adviser to a Cattlemen's Association. A real Westerner—a big-hearted cattleman who was on the square wouldn't condemn me without askin' for proofs. You take this Bodkin's word. If he hasn't got some queer reason to fasten this crime on me, it's a shore bet he itches to hang someone. Wal, I happen to be innocent an' I can prove it. I could choke up an' spit fire at the idee of my bein' taken for a low-down skunk who'd shoot a boy in the back to rob him. An' swallow this, Mister Raine Surface—you'll rue the day you insulted a ragamuffin of a cowboy who was only huntin' for a job."

The silence which followed Brazos's arraignment was broken by Inskip.

"Surface," he said caustically to the pale-faced rancher. "You're new to this range. All you Kansas cattlemen need to be reminded thet this is western Colorado. Which is to say the border of New Mexico. An' mebbe yore years oot heah air too few for you to know what thet means. All the same, Bodkin an' you should have given this cowboy the benefit of a doubt."

"Bodkin said he had proofs," rejoined Surface testily. "I took his word."

"Texans hang together," tartly interposed the deputy sheriff, giving a double meaning to the verb. "Inskip wanted to ride out on this hunt. I reckon he had a hunch. I really didn't want him."

"Bodkin, I'm givin' you a hunch," drawled Inskip, with tone and glance that warmed Brazos. "Kiskadden is a Texan. Mebbe you didn't know thet."

At this juncture, when a strong argument seemed imminent, the red-headed girl moved her horse close to

Surface and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Dad, don't say any more," she implored. "There must be a mistake. You stay out of it. *That* cowboy never murdered Allen Neece."

"Lura, don't interfere here," snapped her father impatiently.

"Mr. Surface, we'll ride on in," said Bodkin, and gave his men a peremptory order to move on.

Before the riders closed in on Brazos, he gave the redheaded girl an intent look and a smile of gratitude for her championship. Her big eyes, still wide and dark, appeared to engulf him. Then the cavalcade started.

Before they had ridden many paces a clatter of hoofs behind and a call for Bodkin again halted the riders. The rancher Surface followed.

"A word with you, Bodkin," he said, reining his mount.

"Sartinly, Mister Surface," returned the deputy, hastening to fall out of line.

"About that suit of mine against—" he began, with something of pomposity. But Brazos made quick note of the fact that that was all he could hear. Bodkin and Surface walked their horses out of hearing.

Brazos was not missing anything. The two riders who had the disagreeable task of holding the corpse in the saddle and keeping it covered swore openly at this second loss of time. As Brazos turned to face forward again, he met Inskip's deep gray eyes in which there flashed a bright steely glint that could be interpreted in only one way.

Brazos's blood took a hot leap, then receded to leave him cold. This halt boded ill to him. Sight of Bodkin's grim visage, as he came riding back from his short colloquy with Surface, warned Brazos of the unexpected and the worst.

But Bodkin took the lead of the cavalcade again without a word other than a command to ride. His tenseness seemed to be communicated to all. Their faces set away from the prisoner. Inskip took off his heavy coat and laid it back across the cantle of his saddle —an action Bodkin might have taken as thought-provoking had he noticed it. Brazos's reaction revolved around sight of the two big gun butts sticking out of Inskip's belt. They spoke a language to Brazos as clear as had been the gray lightning in Inskip's eyes.

The outskirts of Las Animas lay just ahead, beyond a bridge over a brook that brawled down to the Purgatory. Oaks and cottonwoods lined the west bank.

"Stop hyar, men," ordered Bodkin, wheeling his horse. "Inskip, you ride on in an' report."

The Texan made no reply nor any move to act upon the deputy's command.

"Segel, you an' Bill wait hyar with Neece," went on Bodkin. "The rest of you come with me."

He turned to ride off the road. "Inskip," he said, suddenly, halting again. "Are you takin' orders?"

"Not when it doesn't suit me," replied the Texan. "What you up to, Bodkin?"

"I'm goin' to finish this job right hyar," rejoined the deputy fiercely. "An' if you don't want your Texas pride hurt, you'd better not see what's comin' off."

"Wal, I ain't so sensitive as all thet," drawled Inskip.

Brazos realized the game now and what a slim chance he had for his life. That chance was vested in Inskip. An

awful instant he fought the shuddering clutch on his vitals, the appalling check to his thought. It was succeeded by the desperate will and nerve, the unlimited resourcefulness of the cowboy whose flame-spirit had been engendered by such terrible situations as this. There would be one chance for him and when it came he must grasp it with the speed of lightning.

Bodkin led down the west bank of the brook. The trees and rocks broke up the formation of the posse. Brazos's sharp eye caught the rider behind Bodkin bending forward to untie his lasso from his saddle. They entered a rocky glade dominated by an old cottonwood tree with spreading branches and a dead top. Brazos had been under that tree before.

"Open up," shouted Bodkin. "Prod his hoss out hyar."

"Boss," spoke up one of the posse hoarsely. "I'm bound to speak out. This deal is too raw fer my stomach."

"Rustle then. Git out of hyar," yelled the leader, livid with passion.

"I sure will. Come on, Ben. We didn't join this outfit to hang a cowboy thet ain't proved guilty."

The lean rider addressed detached himself from the group. "Bodkin," he said forcefully. "You're too damn keen on this necktie party. Frank an' me are slopin'."

"Yellow, huh?" shouted the deputy as the couple rode off. "All right. I'll bear it in mind."

"See heah, Bodkin," interposed Inskip, "did you ride all this way to have yore mind changed by Surface?"

"Inskip, you go to hell!" hissed Bodkin, enraged at the sarcastic implication. Nevertheless, it could scarcely have been rage that paled the redness out of his malignant visage.

Brazos read in Inskip's eyes what Bodkin failed to see, and it was that intelligence which sustained him. The Texan might have a trump card up his sleeve, but Brazos could only think of two desperate chances, one of which he was sure would be presented.

"Flip thet noose, Barsh," ordered Bodkin sardonically, addressing a lean rider whose hat shaded his face. He had a coiled rope in his left hand. He gave the coil a toss. The loop spread to fall over Brazos's head and lodge on his shoulders. Another flip and the noose closed around his neck.

The feel of the hard smooth hemp against Brazos's bare flesh liberated in him the devil that he had kept leashed. Brazos had never before suffered the odium of this phase of border law. Barsh plainly quailed before Brazos's steady gaze.

"Pile off, all of you," shouted Bodkin stridently, dismounting to lean his rifle against the tree. "Barsh, throw the end of your rope over thet branch."

"*Hold on!*"

This order issued from the Texan, whose hand obstructed Barsh's arm in his effort to toss up the rope.

"Wha-at?" bawled Bodkin, rudely disrupted, glaring at Inskip.

Bodkin was the only rider beside Brazos who had not dismounted. The others had laid aside their rifles and shotguns to crowd back of Barsh, nervously hurrying to get the gruesome job done.

Inskip deliberately rode between them and Brazos. "Bodkin, he might have a mother or sweetheart. An' he'll want to send some word."

"Aw, hell! Let him blab it pronto then."

"Cowboy, do you want to tell me who you air an' send some message?"

queried Inskip calmly.

"I shore do. But I don't want this skunk to heah it."

"Wal, you can tell me," returned Inskip, and pulled his horse toward Brazos.

"Hyar, Inskip—*not so close!*" shrieked Bodkin.

The Texan leaned toward Brazos to whisper swift and low, "Grab my guns, but don't kill onless you have to."

Brazos's clawlike hands swept out. As he jerked loose the two big guns, Inskip spurred his horse to lunge away.

"*Freeze!* Damn yu!" pealed out Brazos, as he covered Bodkin and the startled posse.

Chapter Two

The Letter

BRAZOS heard Inskip's horse pound over the rocks and plow the brook. The Texan was racing for town. Bodkin turned a ghastly hue. Barsh gasped and dropped the rope. The others stood stiff, surely expecting those menacing guns to belch fire and death.

"Hands up! Turn yore backs!" ordered Brazos, his voice ice-edged. "Bodkin, tell yore men to fork their hawsses. One move for a gun means I'll kill you first."

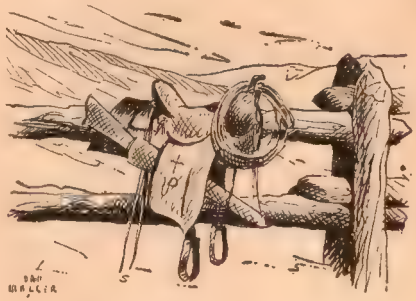
"Fellers—he's got—me cold," rejoined the deputy huskily. "Fer Gawd's sake—lay off your hardware— Climb on."

While they mounted stiffly, Brazos hauled the lasso in with his left hand and wound it around the pommel.

"Ride oot, you hombres. Yu go last, Bodkin. An' when we hit the road yell for Segel an' yore other man to go ahaid."

When the riders emerged from the grove Bodkin bawled to the couple on guard with the dead man.

"Ride on, you fellers—an' don't look back!"



The wide long main street of Las Animas was familiar to Brazos, despite the many new buildings. The place had doubled its population in five years. The old gray clapboard and brown adobe structures stood side by side now with the new ones of more imposing front.

Brazos's roving gaze caught sight of a sign: *Mexican Joe. Hot Tamales*, and his heart leaped. If old Joe happened to come out of his restaurant now, there would be a recognition somewhat disconcerting to Bodkin and his posse. But Joe was not one of the many to see the strange procession ride down the street. Brazos was aware of a quickly augmenting crowd in his rear. Before half a block had been traversed, Brazos saw to his left a building and a sign that had not been there in his day. Both sheriff and jail had come to the cattle town.

"Turn in, yu-all, an' set tight," called Brazos.

Men were grouped about, and out in front stood a tall bareheaded man in his shirt sleeves. He had a silver star on his black vest. He stood significantly sidewise toward the street, his right hand low. Brazos breasted the hitching-rail to see a broad, lined face, deep piercing eyes, a thin-lipped, close-shut mouth, and bulging chin. Texas was written all over that visage.

"Air yu Kiskadden?" queried Brazos sharply.

"Thet's me," came the curt reply from the man.

"Did Inskip give yu a hunch aboot this?"

"He told me you'd be likely to ride in, but I'm bound to admit I didn't expect you."

"Sheriff, will yu give me a square deal?"

"You can rest assured of thet, cowboy. I'm the law heah."

"My Gawd, but it's a relief to pass these over. Heah!" burst out Brazos, and with a dexterous flip of the guns, he turned them in the air to catch them by the barrels and hand them to the sheriff. "Sheriff, I shore haven't had many deals where I was more justified in throwin' guns than in this one. But when Inskip gave me a chance to use them, he whispered for me not to shoot unless I had to. So I bluffed yore deputy an' his posse."

"So I see. Wal, if you bluffed them, why didn't you ride the other way, instead of insultin' my office this heah way?"

"I happen to be a Texan an' I'm sore."

"I seen thet long ago. Go on. Why'd you come?"

"Last night I was held up oot heah by three men. I'll tell yu in private how they acted, what they said, an' the lie they told me. It was aboot night. I was cold an' tired. Bay heah was lame. So when the three hombres rode away, I went to sleep in the cabin there.

"In the mawnin' I found I'd been sleepin' with a daid man. An' I'd just got ootside the cabin when Bodkin with his posse came tearin' up. I had no idee what they wanted an' they'd covered me before I found oot. Wal, they arrested me for the murder of the young man they found in the cabin, shot in the back. Sheriff, you can bet yore life thet those three hombres last night an' Bodkin's ootfit this mawnin' knew the daid boy was in the cabin nine hours before I knew.

"There was nothin' for me to do but go along. I went. Bodkin is a surly hombre, an' he's a hell of a queer deputy sheriff. First off it didn't look like he had any idee of hangin' me. But he stopped at this Twin Sombreros Ranch oot heah, held up by the rancher Surface. An' from thet moment Bodkin grew hell-bent to hang me. Inskip saw it comin' an' he tried to reason with Bodkin. But yu cain't reason with a bullheaded, fourflush deputy sheriff who from some queer twist was daidset to hang me. When they had the lariat aboot my neck, Inskip rode in so I could grab his guns. Thet saved my life, sheriff. I'm innocent an' I can prove it. I want my name cleared. Thet's why I took the risk of holdin' up yore ootfit an' ridin' in heah to surrender."

"Who air you, cowboy?" queried Kiskadden searchingly.

"Thet'll have to come oot, I reckon," returned Brazos reluctantly. "I haven't been in Las Animas for six years. But there'll be men heah who'll vouch for me."

"All right. Get down, cowboy. Bod-

kin, you look bustin' with yore side of this story. Mebbe you'd better hold in—"

"Aw hell!" interrupted the deputy, his face working. "Wait till you hear my side. He's a slick-tongued feller, believe me. I'll gamble he turns out to be a range-ridin' desperado. An' it's a thousand to one thet he murdered young Neece."

"Neece! Not Abe Neece's boy?" exclaimed Kiskadden, shocked out of his composure.

"Yes. Young Allen Neece."

"Aw, too bad—too bad!" rejoined the sheriff in profound regret. "As if poor Abe had not had enough trouble!"

"Boss, you just bet it's too bad. It'll sure go hard with Allen's twin sisters. Them gurls thought the world of him."

"Fetch Neece in," ended Kiskadden, and taking Brazos's arm he led him into the office.

"An' see heah, Sheriff," spoke up Brazos. "Will yu have my hawss taken good care of? An' Bodkin took my gun, watch, penknife—an' a personal letter. Thet's all I had, an' the letter means most to me."

"Cowboy, I'll be responsible for your hawss an' your belongings."

"Thanks. Thet's a load off my mind. An' one thing more," said Brazos, lowering his voice so that the men carrying in the body of Neece could not hear him. "I reckon thet letter will prove my innocence. I got it yesterday mawnin' at Latimer, which you shore know is a hell of a long day's ride. An' if I know anythin' aboot daid men, young Neece was killed durin' the day. Hold an inquest, sheriff, an' make shore what hour thet pore boy was murdered. 'Cause the whole deal has a look of murder."

"You're a cool hand," replied Kiskadden admiringly. "I kinda like you. From Texas, eh?"

"Shore. I was born in Uvalde."

"How old air you?"

"Twenty-five."

"Wal, you don't look thet. Any folks livin'?"

"There was—a few years ago. But I've been too unhappy lately to write home."

"Air you straight, cowboy?"

"I am, Sheriff, so help me Gawd!" answered Brazos passionately, meeting full the penetrating gray eyes that had something of shadow in them.

"Wal, I promised you a square deal," concluded Kiskadden. "Come with me. I'll have to lock you up."

A corridor opened from the office. Kiskadden unlocked the first door on the right, to disclose a small room with one barred window. The only article Brazos could see at quick glance was a blanketed couch. Kiskadden escorted Brazos in and halted in the doorway.

"Cowboy, you don't seem to concern yourself aboot why I'm lockin' you up."

"Concern? Say, I'm tickled to death. What have I got to worry aboot now? You're a Texan an' a man. You'll see through my part in this deal. But when I get oot— Sheriff, I'm askin' yu—please get possession of my letter an' please don't let anybody but yu read it. I shore couldn't stand thet."

"We'll see." The sheriff went out to close and lock the heavy door.

Brazos lay down on the couch. As he composed himself, the sound of heavy boots and indistinct voices came through the walls from the sheriff's office. The window of his cell opened on the back.

After a while, his blood ceased to race and his thoughts to whirl. "Dog-

gone!" soliloquized Brazos. "When did I ever have a closer shave than thet?" He was well off in jail for a few days. He would be well fed and have a bed to sleep on. And meanwhile, he would piece the fragments of this case together. Something more would come out at his trial, or at least the perfunctory hearing Kiskadden would have to give him.

Next morning the guards brought his breakfast, and the necessary articles with which to wash and shave, and make himself presentable.

"Your trial is comin' off today," one of the two announced. "An' I reckon you needn't be ondue worried."

"Thanks, pardner. Thet's fine. Take me ootside for a stretch."

All morning, however, he was left alone, waiting for a footfall that did not come. The fact of the omission of his noonday meal augured further for his release. Brazos paced his cell, finally achieving patience. At last a slow, clinking step in the corridor ended his wait. That was the step of a Texan.

Brazos was not disappointed. The door opened to admit Kiskadden, who closed and locked it.

"Wal, Brazos," he drawled, "I'm missin' my dinner to have a confab with you."

"Yu know my name?" queried Brazos sharply.

"Shore. It's on the back of this letter. Brazos Keene. Wrote small an' pretty, but I read thet much anyway. I'm glad to tell you no one else has seen it. I reckon Bodkin's man, Segel, put no store on it. An' heah it is, cowboy."

"My Gawd, Sheriff, but I could die for yu—savin' me the shame of disgracin' a girl I once loved," replied Brazos in grateful emotion.

"Wal, I'm glad if it means as much as thet," returned Kiskadden, and he sat down on the couch to take out a black pipe. "I always figger better when I smoke. Not thet I'm not shore you'll go free. It's a pore case agin' you, Brazos, an' has some queer angles."

"Ha! I had thet hunch. Yu wouldn't be a Texas sheriff if yu hadn't seen thet."

"You got this letter the mawnin' of day before yestiddy, at Latimer, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir. An' all by accident, or mebbe a hunch. I was ridin' through aboot eight o'clock. I went in the post office an' was paralyzed to get it. I rode oot of town scared to death. But finally I sloped off under a tree. Gosh, I must have been there for hours but I didn't have the nerve to read it all. But the sun was high an' hot when I rode on again."

"Wal, we had two doctors make the inquest on young Neece," went on Kiskadden. "Our Doc Williamson, who lives heah, an' a surgeon from Denver, who was on a train. Williamson seen him an' dragged him off. They found young Neece had been killed early in the evenin' of thet day you rode oot of Latimer. The bullet hole in his back was shot there after Neece was daid. Both doctors agreed thet he had been roped—there were abrasions on his arms above his elbows—an' jerked off his hawss on his haid. Thet caused his death."

"Wal, my Gawd!" ejaculated Brazos. "I had no rope on my saddle."

"Brazos, I was convinced of yore innocence yestiddy, an' now I know it. But for yore good, I reckon you better

stay for the hearin'. It'll show Bodkin up an' I'll discharge him pronto. Another angle, it leaked oot somewhere thet Surface would jest as lief see you hanged, along with all the grub-line cowboys thet ride through."

"Hell yu say?" queried Brazos thoughtfully. "Sheriff, I shore didn't take a shine to him."

"Surface is new heah. Claims to be from Nebraska. But he's from Kansas. Rich cattleman—an' has a lot of stock. Same as all of us, for thet matter."

"Ahuh. How'd Surface get thet Twin Sombreros Ranch from Neece?"

"Wal, thet's kind of complicated, an' never was cleared up to suit me. Neece was operatin' big. He had five thousand haid comin' up from Texas for Surface. The cash for this herd was paid Neece at the Cattleman's Bank in Dodge. More than fifty thousand dollars. Neece was fetchin' thet sum over heah to our bank. But he got held up by three masked men, an' robbed. Wal, the queer angle is thet the big herd jest vanished off the range. Neither hoof nor hair of them was ever found."

"But the cow ootfit!" exclaimed Brazos, aghast.

"Same as the herd. They vanished. Neece made a blunder at Dodge. He hired a foreman thet he didn't know, let him pick an ootfit, an' sent them south after the herd."

"Thet ootfit was bought off," said Brazos abruptly.

"Wal, there was no proof of anythin' except the longhorns were gone. Neece couldn't deliver to Surface. An' he had been robbed of the money. Twin Sombreros was mortgaged an' the banks wouldn't advance more. Neece lost all to Surface. He's a broken man now, livin' oot of town down the Purgatory. An' the twin gurls, Neece's joy an' pride, air running a restaurant over by the railroad station."

"Twin girls!"

"Shore. Eighteen years old—the prettiest gurls in all the West. An' you cain't tell them apart—not to save yore life. June an' Janis, they're called. Neece was powerful proud of them twins. He sent them back to Kansas City to go to school. Thet was ten years ago. An' he didn't see them often an' not atall of late years. He developed this Twin Sombreros Ranch for them. Thet was his brand. Two high-peaked sombreros.

"Wal, the gurls just got heah when the crash came. Hard luck fer them, everybody swore, an' was sorry. But them gurls had spunk. They borrowed money an' started a restaurant. Old Abe's Mexican cook stuck to them. An' say, thet little restaurant is packed every mealtime, with a crowd waitin' ootside. They've paid back what they borrowed an' now they're makin' money."

"Stampedin' mavericks!" burst out Brazos. "I reckoned I'd heahed some range yarns in my day. But this one takes the cake. I'll bet thet Lura Surface sticks up her nose at the Neece twins, huh?"

"Wal, the wimmenfolks all say Lura is a cat an' powerful jealous of the twins. You see, she queened it over the range till Neece's gurls got heah. An' now she's not got it all her own way."

"Kiskadden, what yu tellin' me all this for?" suddenly queried Brazos, sharp with suspicion.

"Aw, just range gossip, cowboy," drawled the Texan with an evasive smile.

"Yeah? Wal, it's shore powerful interestin' an' yu don't strike me as the

gossipin' kind— I figure Inskip's a friend of yores?"

"Yes. We're pardners in a cattle business, but I'm the silent one. Wal, to come back to yore hearin', which is set fer two o'clock, I'd like you to read thet letter to me."

"Aw! Sheriff, you didn't open it?"

"No."

"What yu want me to read it for?"

"Brazos, I really don't have to heah it, if yu object. But it'll strengthen my conviction, I'm shore. An' I may have to talk turkey to Surface an' some of his cattle association. All the same, I'll respect yore confidence."

"Shore. I—I'll read it to yu," replied Brazos soberly, and as he opened the thick letter his lean brown hands shook slightly.

"'Don Carlos' Rancho, Cimarron. N. M., May 2, 1880,'" he read. "'Dear Brazos: This is the third letter I have written you since you left us over five years ago. I am sure the others never reached you else you would have written. They were sent at a venture. This time, however, I know you will receive this one, and I am writing much that I omitted before. We have a railroad mail service now, *caballero mio;* and this epistle should reach your post office in less than two days. So near yet so far, Brazos!

"'We heard quite by accident that you had lately ridden down from Wyoming to a job with the Two-bar X outfit. A cattleman neighbor of ours, Calhoun, had just returned from Latimer, and he met Britt at the station. Wherever Brazos Keene rides, it will be known! Calhoun told Britt a lot of range gossip, including your latest exploit at Casper, Wyoming (which *I* did not believe) and poor Britt came home like a man who had seen ghosts. He told the cowboys and Nigger Johnson (bless his white heart) told me. Not one of the other boys mentioned it to me. You'll be amazed, Brazos, and I hope hurt a little to learn that every single one of the old outfit you once lorded it over so gayly is still riding for me. They were a sick bunch of cowboys. How they loved you, Brazos! I'd have given much to have been hidden in the bunkhouse when Britt told them about you.

"'They are spoiling little Brazos Ripple Frayne, your namesake, who is nearly five years old. He is a little devil and drives me frantic. He favors his father, Renn, more than me. But he has a little of my Spanish. He never tires of stories about rustlers, gunmen, bandits, buffalo and cattle stampedes. And *your* name makes his eyes grow big and round. You should see Brazos roll a gun and hear him say, 'When I grow up, I'm gonna bore that Billy the Kid!' Oh! it is dreadful, the propensities he shows already. His father does not seem to mind. Britt, who worships the lad, says that when Brazos takes to riding the range, the hard years of the New Mexican border will be past.

"'Since you and your outfit broke up the Slaughter gang and did away with Sewall McCoy, Clements and their tools, we have no rustling on a big scale. Strange to say, we were never drawn into the Lincoln County War, which was in its incipiency when you rode for Don Carlos' Rancho. That terrible feud accounted for the lives of three hundred men, surely the bloodiest war the West ever knew. Billy the Kid came out of it alive. He and a few of his desperado allies still actively rustle cattle and find a ready market. Billy has more friends than enemies. He has visited Don Carlos' Rancho twice dur-

ing the last year. He is twenty years old and has killed twenty men, not including Indians and Mexicans. Billy would not be bad looking but for his buck tooth. He is a quiet little fellow. Such eyes! They are like forked blue lightning. Pat Garrett is on Billy's trail. They are expected to meet any day. The range is speculating. Britt and Renn both say Garrett will never risk an even break with Billy. If he does, he'll get killed. Renn said once, 'I've seen the day I could beat that little hombre to a gun!' And Britt said, 'Brazos could do it *now!*' Oh, you border ruffians! You strange cold Westerners! I confess to a little weakness for Billy the Kid. That's not strange, considering my Spanish heritage, and the fact that before I married an outlaw gunman, I had a soft spot in my heart for a gunman cowboy, one Señor Brazos Keene.

" 'So far as we know, Billy's outfit never stole a steer off our range. After my father's custom here, I had Billy and his gang to dinner. He told me he remembered my father and evidently cherished that memory.

" 'Well, the good, bad old days are over, at least for Don Carlos' Rancho. We are running over seventy thousand head. The railroad has simplified cattle-raising. The long hard drives are a thing of the past in this territory. Chisum, the old rustler baron with his jingle-bobbed cattle, survived the Lincoln County War. Billy the Kid, who rode for Chisum once, had sworn to kill him. But the old man still holds forth at Seven Rivers, surrounded by a hard outfit, and a hundred thousand head of longhorns. Brazos, he once asked me to marry him. I've never forgotten the shock of that. Right now I can see you shake your handsome curly head and say as you did once: 'Wal, who'n hell hasn't asked Holly Ripple thet?'

" 'Brazos, I am wonderfully happy. Renn has more than justified the faith I placed in him. He is a big man on the New Mexico ranges and long ago has lived down that vague hard name that came with him from Dodge and Abilene. My father's traditions and work have been carried on. We have our darling little boy and—dare I confess it?—expect another little Frayne at no distant date. May it be a girl—Señorita Holly Ripple Frayne! Our material riches do not mean very much. I forgot to tell you that my riders have a share in our cattle business. In fact, Brazos, there is only one drop of bitterness to taint the sweet cup of Don Carlos' Rancho. And that is your loss, your wandering, rolling-stone life, your bitter fiery spirit and your fate to throw a gun, your inevitable fall.

" 'We have heard of you often. You know range gossip—how cowboys love to talk, to carry tales. If I believed all I have heard, my heart would be broken. But I *know* you would never be crooked. Still all my faith in you cannot change the fact that haunts me. If you persist in your lone wolf wandering from bad cow camps to hard cow towns, always with that chip on your shoulder, it will not be long until you too, like many of your old pards, find a grave on the 'lone prairie.' That would be a pity, Brazos. You are such a fine boy. You have such splendid possibilities.

" 'Britt tells me that I broke your heart. Oh, how I have prayed that was untrue! I know you loved me. But you were a wild boy, Brazos. You were only nineteen years old—my own age. I felt like a mother to you. Indeed I did love

you, but it was as a sister. That, of course, I did not know until Renn came into our lives. He was my man, Brazos.

" 'If you loved me so deeply as Britt and the cowboys seem to believe, you could never go to the bad. The greatest grief can be a source of joy. I don't believe you loved me greatly. If you had, you would have paid me the honor of being better for it. You were just disappointed, cut to the soul, and instead of letting the goodness, the sweetness in you dominate your future, you rode away with that proud, passionate devilish side uppermost.

" 'Brazos, in this letter, which I am certain you will receive, you have come to the end of your rope. You will stop your wandering—your drinking. You were never a drunkard, but you could easily have become one. You must find a steady job—*if you refuse to return to Don Carlos' Rancho*—and you will be worthy of my faith, and Renn's regard, and the love of these cowboys.

" 'There are hundreds of pretty lovable western girls just aching, just eating their hearts out for a man like you. Find one of them, and love her. (Oh, don't tell me you couldn't. You *could.* Didn't you have a case on Señorita Dolores Mendozo, while you were courting me?) Ah, Brazos! Love her and marry her and settle down to deserve the reward that should come to all cowboys like you—who have made this glorious West habitable for us—made its empire possible.

" 'Fetch her out here to live. To be my friend! And if in the fulness of time you and she were to be blessed with a little girl, let us pledge her and little Brazos to each other.

" 'This is the last letter I shall ever write you, my friend. I hope and pray you take it as I have written it, and that you will consider my husband's proposition, which follows in a postscript. *Adios Señor,* Ever yours faithfully, Holly Ripple Frayne.

" 'P.S. Dear Cowboy Old-Timer: I am adding a few words to Holly's letter, which I have read. But she will not get to see what I write you.

" 'Britt wants you to come back to Don Carlos' Rancho. So do I. So does the outfit. We are going to need you.

" 'Brazos, let me hurry to get rid of things hard to express. I know how you felt about Holly. I know because I felt the same. If she had chosen you, I still would have stayed on. I would never have expected—never have wanted to get over it. Loving such a woman changed me from an outlaw to a man. For years, I have worried about you. Britt and I, all the cowboys, have never stopped looking for you to come back. But the deeper hope, of course, is that you would go straight and true, wherever you were. That's that.

" 'Brazos, Holly's letter might mislead you about affairs of the range out here. Well, as a matter of fact, the rustling business is as good as the cattle business. There's a new outfit up in the hills where Slaughter used to hide out. And Britt doesn't like the prospects one damn little bit.

" 'I could tell you several queer looking deals, but one will go to show you the old game is kicking back, as we always expected it'd do. Not so long ago, the biggest herd of longhorns Britt ever saw drifted up the Cimarron—a gaunted bunch that had seen long and hard travel. The outfit worked them across the valley, avoiding the cow camps, taking scarce enough time to fatten up, and they split the herd and drove to the railroad, shipping from

Maxwell and Hebron to Kansas City.

"'Britt, the old fox, thought the drive had a queer look and took pains to get these details. They were all the facts obtainable. But somewhere along this trail to the railroad, the name Surface leaked out. You know how strange things happen in this cattle game. It's a safe bet, Brazos, that this drive was a steal, as big a one as we ever saw come out of Texas. And naturally we're passing the buck with a hunch to you. Britt swears he never knew a cowboy in your class to scent and follow crooked tracks. Keep this under your hat, old-timer, and look around over your Colorado way. There probably is another Sewall McCoy cropping up. These cattlemen-rustlers are the bane of the ranges. A real honest to God rustler was always easy to contend with, till it came to the fight, and then you could gamble on hell and bullets. But these respectable buyers and sellers of cattle, while all the while they have outfits rustling for them—these are the tough nuts to crack.

"'It's Britt's hunch and mine that this man Surface might turn out to belong to the class mentioned above. No need to tell you, Brazos, what a delicate matter such suspicion is. It's something you just can't speak out loud in the West. Every rancher has stolen cattle, knowingly or not, and he's testy about it. As for the crooked rancher—at the least hint he goes for his gun, and roars to the law and his associations afterward. Ride down this man Surface, and write to us, Brazos.

"'And, cowboy, while you're doing it, consider coming back to be my foreman of the outfit running the Ripple brand. On shares! Yours truly, Renn Frayne.'"

At the conclusion of this reading, Kiskadden strode to and fro in the cell, while Brazos sat with bowed head over the letter.

"Brazos," the sheriff declared finally, "there ain't much I can say, except I'm glad I trusted you. If I hadn't an' you'd sprung thet letter on me, I'd shore been ashamed. It's a wonderful letter! And now, it's aboot time for yore trial, Brazos," he added, consulting his watch.

Chapter Three

The Hearing

THE sheriff's office appeared rather cramped quarters with the dozen or more occupants standing and sitting around. Outside a considerable crowd had collected. With few exceptions, notably the dark-garbed Surface and some close associates at his elbow, the assembly was composed of dusty-booted, roughly clad cattlemen.

Brazos took a swift survey of these spectators, more to sense their attitude than to look for someone who knew him. That there would be old acquaintances present he felt sure. For the time being the feeling in general seemed one of curious hostility.

"Set there, Keene," said Kiskadden indicating one of two chairs back of his desk. Brazos saw his gun and belt, his watch and penknife, lying on some papers. The desk drawer was half open, showing the dark butts of several Colts.

"Let everybody in, if there's room," called the sheriff to the guard at the door. Presently Kiskadden pounded on

his desk to stop the talking. He stood erect. "Fellow citizens," he said, "my mind aboot this case is made up. But I'll hold a hearin' so thet you-all can get the facts."

Surface took a step out from the group of ranchmen, evidently accompanying him. His mien was forceful, arrogant, suggestive of power. His bland face appeared to Brazos to be a mask. Not since Brazos had taken to the cattle trails had he trusted eyes like these.

"Sheriff, I move we try this man before twelve jurors. I will serve along with the members of the Cattlemen's Association. We can pick the others from the businessmen here."

"What's the idee of thet?" demanded Kiskadden.

"Your declaration that you had already come to a decision proves the consensus of opinion correct."

"An' what's thet opinion, Mister Raine Surface?" queried the sheriff sarcastically.

"You wouldn't hang a Texas cowboy. This murderer would already have swung but for Inskip, who's another of your Texas breed."

"Wal, Surface, thet Texas breed opened up this cattle empire. An' the strange fact is you seldom heah of one of them gettin' hanged. Thet might come from their gun-throwin' proclivity, an' then again it might be thet few Texans deserve to swing. In this case, I'm refusin' your offer of a jury. The law of this county is invested in me."

"Kiskadden, you may rest assured your authority will not last long," rejoined Surface heatedly.

Brazos took in this byplay with a thrilled interest and keen observation. Surface certainly had no conception of Texas character. Evidently, he was rich, powerful, sure of himself. He seemed uttterly blind to the fact that he himself was on trial there, before at least three cool Texans.

"I'm as shore as you air of thet," drawled Kiskadden, his narrowed eyes like slits of gray on the rancher. "An' I'm also shore of somethin' else. It's goin' to look damn queer presently, when I prove this cowboy innocent, thet you're so keen on hangin' him."

Surface turned a dark red. His collar appeared to be too tight for his bulging neck. "You insulting Texan. I'll run you—out of office for that!" he exclaimed stridently.

"Run an' be damned. Yore action an' yore talk air not regular in this deal. They look fishy to this court. To be lousy with money an' haid of the new Cattle Association shore doesn't entitle you to run me an' my office. Do I make myself clear, Mister Surface?"

If the rancher did not take the hint at that, his associates surely did, for they drew him back and shut his mouth.

"All right. The hearin's on," called out Kiskadden loudly. "Deputy Bodkin, step forward."

"Yes, sir," replied the burly officer, coming up to the desk.

"Take off yore hat when you testify to the court. Place yore hand on this Bible an' swear to tell the truth an' nothin' but the truth."

Bodkin took the oath.

"Now proceed with yore testimony."

"Wal, sir, it was late after two o'clock, night before last," began Bodkin, glib with importance. "I'd been playin' cards an' had hardly got asleep when I was woke by somebody at my winder. I seen two men. It was too dark to see their faces plain. They was

strangers. One of them told me they'd watched a cowboy shoot another off his horse, search him, and drag him into the cabin. Thet was the old Hill cabin, long empty, six miles west of town.

"My informant told me the cowboy came out of the cabin, unsaddled the horses, an' turned them loose. Then he went back. It was rainin' an' cold. He'd likely stay in the cabin till daybreak. Then the two fellers rustled off in the dark. I heerd their horses. Wal, I got up, dressed an' rustled out fer a posse. At thet hour, it wasn't easy. I had to take who I could get. It was near dawn when I'd collected ten men. Inskip come along on his own accord. I didn't want him. He heerd me wake his riders. He told them to saddle his hoss.

"Wal, we rode out fast, an' arrived at the cabin jest at daybreak. The prisoner thar had just stepped out the door. We held him up, took his gun an' what he had in his pockets. He was a cool one. I seen blood on his hand. I sent men inside to search the cabin. They found the dead man in the cabin an' fetched him out. It was Allen Neece. Thet was sure a surprise to me. His pockets was turned inside out. I heerd today thet Neece won a hundred dollars at faro the afternoon before he rode out of town. He was goin' to see some girl.

"Wal, the prisoner hyar sure went white an' sick when the dead boy was carried out an' laid on the grass. A blind man could have seen thet he'd murdered him. We found one hoss, the prisoner's. An' Segel packed the dead boy in on his saddle. All the way in I was debatin' on hangin' the murderer. An' when I got to it, this side of Twin Sombreros Ranch, Inskip crowded in front of us an' gave the cowboy a chance to grab his two guns. We got held up pronto an' drove into town. An' I'm fer arrestin' Inskip—"

"When Surface called you back, what did he say?" interrupted Kiskadden.

"What?" queried Bodkin, disconcerted for the first time.

"Surface halted you at his ranch, then followed you an' stopped you. He drew you out of hearin' of yore men. This court is powerful interested in what Surface said."

"Wal—sir," exploded the deputy, his swarthy visage turning yellow, "he advised hangin' the cowboy right then an' thar. Said he distrusted this office. Too much red tape an' favor to Texans."

"Surface advised hangin' the prisoner without trial?"

"Yes, sir. An' I was just set to do it. Barsh had the rope around his neck when Inskip broke up the game."

"Thet will do, Bodkin," said the sheriff. "Doctor Williamson, will you please step forward an' make yore report."

A stout middle-aged man, with ruddy face, approached the desk.

"Mister Sheriff," he began, "and gentlemen. My fellow practitioner and I find that young Neece came to his violent death not later than the middle of the afternoon of day before yesterday. We find that death was caused by a compound fracture of the skull with consequent concussion of the brain. The bullet hole in his back was made long after he was dead. He had been roped and jerked heavily to the ground, probably from a horse."

"Thank you, Doctor," replied the sheriff. "Now, gentlemen, let me read you a telegram received heah this mawnin'. It is dated Latimer, Colorado, an' it reads: '*Sheriff Steve Kiskadden,*

Las Animas. The letter addressed to Brazos Keene was delivered to him in person at eight-ten o'clock day before yesterday morning. May fifth. Signed Postmaster John Hilton.'"

"Brazos Keene!" ejaculated Bodkin, as if the name stirred vague associations. A murmur ran through the standing crowd. But it was certain that Raine Surface had never heard the name.

"Yes, Brazos Keene," drawled the Texas sheriff, not without a dry satisfaction. "Gentlemen, you all know thet Latimer is a long way from Las Animas. Much too far for the hardest of hard-ridin' cowboys to get to the Hill cabin in the afternoon—an' murder an' rob young Allen Neece. The letter Keene has in his possession absolutely clears him of any implication whatever in this tragedy. It was physically impossible for Brazos Keene to be there!"

Kiskadden silenced the uproar that followed upon the heels of his dramatic announcement. "I'm returning your gun, Brazos," he drawled, "and offerin' my apologies." He turned toward his white-faced deputy. "An' as my last official act, Bodkin, I'm firin' yu! An' then I'm resignin' as sheriff of this county!"

Kiskadden took off his star and laid it on the desk, and then, arm in arm with Brazos, shouldered his way through the crowd.

"Someone here wants to see you, Brazos," he said, and at the same time Brazos saw a familiar face appear before him.

"Hank Bilyen!"

The old man put out his hand enthusiastically. "Say, Brazos, but you're sure a sight for these old eyes! An' I've got somethin' to tell you that'll sure make you want to stay right here and get to work."

"Uh-huh. Well, suppose we go rob the bank first. Even a grub-line-ridin' cowboy's gotta have some money these days."

At the door they were accosted by a lithe young man in rider's garb much the worse for wear. He had a clean-cut, youthful face, tanned by exposure, and fine eyes.

"I'd like to shake your hand, Keene," he said hesitatingly, but with a winning smile.

"Shore. An' who're yu?" returned Brazos slowly, as he returned the smile. He was the easiest cowboy on the ranges to approach—when he happened to meet this type.

"Jack Sain. Hank knows me. I've been pretty friendly with the Neeces. Allen was my pard. It plumb busted me all up—what happened to him."

"Ahuh. Wal, I'm darned glad to meet yu, Jack."

"Brazos, it was Jack's friendship for the Neeces thet cost him his job," Hank Bilyen offered. "He rode fer Surface. You see there ain't any love lost between the Surfaces an' the Neeces."

"Wal, Jack, I'll be wantin' to hobnob with yu some," said Brazos thoughtfully. "Where yu workin' now?"

"Nowhere. I can't get a job. Surface is strong in the association an' he's queered me."

"Doggone!" mused Brazos. "Thet's interestin'. Surface 'pears to be playin' a high hand around heah. Jack, where can I find yu later in the afternoon?"

"Meet me at the Twin Sombreros Restaurant, up by the railroad station. About suppertime."

"Thet the place run by the Neece girls? Won't they be kinda nervous—seein' me?"

"Janis was with me in the sheriff's office. Before she went she said, 'Jack, I'd never believe that cowboy murdered Allen.' Both the girls are dead game, Brazos, an' they'll be glad to see you."

"All right, Jack. I'll be there."

They parted, and Bilyen led Brazos slowly up the wide street. "Fine lad, thet," Bilyen was saying. "Down on his luck now. I reckon he didn't tell you everythin'. Lura Surface was sweet on Jack. She throws herself at every feller who strikes her fancy. But when Jack met June Neece, he went loco. You never seen a cowboy so deep in love. An' June leans to him a lot, though she's not a hell of a flirt at all like Janis."

"My Gawd! Hank, is this a story yu're readin' me? The next thing yu'll tell me these sisters will be pretty an' sweet an'—wal, Jack said they were daid game."

"Cowboy, wait till you see them."

"What am I gonna wait for? Tell me, man. An' then if it's bad news I can fork my hawss an' ride."

"It's good news, Brazos," replied Bilyen soberly, taking him seriously. "June an' Jan Neece are the wonderfulest girls this range ever saw. Pretty! Hell, thet ain't no word! What's more they're sweet an' true—an' game? Say! Old Abe developed thet ranch for them—sent them east to school to be educated—to do him proud. Ten years ago! They came back with trunks of stylish clothes an' crazy to make joy at Twin Sombreros. Only they never got there! Folks love these girls because they're unspoiled. An' when their fortunes fell, they went plumb to work."

"Hank, I reckon I better climb Bay an' race for Montana," declared Brazos ruefully.

"Why, you darn fool?"

"Cause I have a turrible weakness."

"Haw! Haw! You haven't outgrowed thet. Wal, Brazos, I reckon it's on the cairds fer you to stay here."

"On the cairds? Hell, yes! They always run thet way for me. Same old—deal! If I've got any sense atall, I'll rustle."

"Since when did Brazos Keene grow selfish?" queried Bilyen with subtle scorn.

"Selfish? Me! What's eatin' you, Hank Bilyen?"

"Think of thet pore murdered boy—an' his brokenhearted dad—an' them fine girls workin' from daylight to midnight."

"Thet's what I am thinkin' aboot!" protested Brazos.

Bilyen halted in front of a bank and spoke low in Brazos's ear. "They've lost their brother. An' the beautiful home thet was built fer them. Their father is dyin' of grief. They've been cheated, robbed, ruined. An' last, Brazos, young Allen Neece was givin' his time to ferretin' out the secret of thet ruin. *An' thet's why he was murdered!*"

Brazos leaned back against the rough stone wall of the bank and drew a deep breath that whistled at the intake. His narrowed gaze fastened down the wide street, with its wagons and horses and busy sidewalks, out to the gray rangeland and the purple mountains. There was no use for him to rail at destiny or to try to run away from the inevitable. He pressed a steel-like hand against his breast where his precious letter lay in his pocket. He remembered.

"Shore, Hank, I savvy yu," he answered with the old cool drawl. "Let's go in an' rob the bank. Then yu can

take me oot to meet Abe Neece. An' after thet, I'll see the twins. Doggone! Only yesterday or thereaboots, I was a friendless, grub-line-ridin' cowboy. Funny aboot life! But it's worth livin'."

A few minutes later, Brazos stood outside the bank again, feeling a compact bulge in his pocket not altogether made by his precious letter.

"Hank, I only wanted a little money," expostulated Brazos. "How'n hell will I ever pay it back?"

"Holy mackerel, Brazos, ask me an easy one. But I know you will," rejoined Bilyen with a laugh. "I can spare thet. Before I went to work fer Neece, I sold my herd to him, an' I've saved my money an' wages. Lucky I did. I'm takin' care of the old man now an' I lent the twins enough to start their restaurant."

"Wal, yu always was a good friend, Hank. Yu deserve to be a big rancher. Say, who's this gazabo comin'?"

"Thet's Sam Mannin'. Still has his store down the street. Sure, you remember Sam."

"No, I shore wouldn't have known him," said Brazos. "Gosh, what a few years can do!"

A spare gray Westerner of venerable and kindly aspect came up to them, his lined face breaking into a smile.

"Hello, Brazos," he said heartily, extending his hand. "I heard you were in town, but I didn't see any smoke. Glad to see you again. An' just about the same!"

"Howdy, Sam. It's just fine to shake yore hand. I'm gonna run in pronto an' buy oot yore store. Have you any of those red silk scarfs Louise used to sell me?"

"Plenty, cowboy. My store an' business have grown with the years."

"Thet's fine. An' how's Louise?"

"Married long ago, Brazos. She has two children."

"I'll be doggoned! You tell Louise Mannin' I swore she'd wait for me."

"I will. An' if I remember Louise in your day, she'll be fussed. Be sure to drop over. How are you, Hank?"

"Wal, Sam, I was feelin' low till Brazos rode to town. Things will pick up now."

"I shouldn't wonder," responded Manning, wagging his gray head, and he passed on into the bank.

"Hank, let's duck down an alley, or somethin'. If I meet any more old friends I'll bust."

"Stand your ground, cowboy. I got to buy some grub. Haw! Haw! Look who's spotted you. Has she got eyes? Aw no—"

"Save me, Hank. Who'n hell? I'll bet it's thet Surface girl."

"Right, Brazos. I'll duck in the store. Hope some of you'll be left when I come out."

Brazos had attention only for the stunningly handsome and strikingly attired young woman who bore down upon him, face flushed and eyes alight. She was taller than she had appeared astride a horse, beautifully proportioned, and several years beyond her teens.

"I congratulate you, Mr. Brazos Keene," she said, graciously offering her hand. "I'm very glad indeed. It was a stupid blunder."

"Wal, thet's shore nice of yu, Miss Surface," replied Brazos as he bowed bareheaded to take her hand. "Considerin' how keen yore father was to see me hanged, I'm more'n grateful to see yu wasn't."

"Oh, Dad is impossible," she declared impatiently. "He seems to suspect every cowboy who rides in from the

West. If one happens to come along from Kansas, he'll hire him."

"Shore does seem unreasonable an' hard on us Western riders," drawled Brazos, his gaze strong on her. "I was aboot to shake the dust of Las Animas. But now, I just reckon I'll hang around. Do you think I might get to see yu again?"

"You might," she replied, blushing very becomingly. "I'd like nothing better."

"But Mr. Surface wouldn't like it."

"I'm over twenty-one."

"Wal, you shore don't look it. I wonder where I was all the time yu've been growin' up into such a lovely girl."

"I've wasted a good deal of it on cowboys less appreciative than you," she replied, accepting his nonchalant challenge with a dark flash in her green-blue eyes.

"Most cowboys air dumb. When an' how can I see yu, Lura?"

"When do you want to, Brazos?" she returned brightly, the red spots playing prettily in her cheeks.

"Wal, I want to right now. But I've got to go with Hank. Would tomorrow be too soon? I reckon I can wait thet long."

"I imagine you will find that long time very trying," she said quizzically, watching him with amused wonder. Yet she had the soft light in her eyes that usually shone in women's eyes for Brazos.

"I'll just aboot die. I'm afraid it happened to me oot at yore ranch the other day—when you told yore father thet I never murdered Allen Neece."

"What happened?"

"I don't know what yet. But I felt powerful strange around heah," replied Brazos, putting his hand to his heart, smiling broadly as he did so.

"You *are* sudden! Brazos Keene, I believe all I've heard about you today, except that you were crooked."

"Wal, in thet case, I'll forgive yu."

"I'll bet it's true you've been a perfect devil with women."

"If havin' my heart broke a lot of times proves thet—wal, I'm guilty."

"There's Dad down the street," she returned coolly. "Meet me tomorrow afternoon about three in the grove on the east bank of the brook that runs into the Purgatory about a mile out of town. Can you remember all that?"

"I'll be there," promised Brazos.

She rewarded him with a dazzling smile and swept on down the street.

"Brimstone an' chain lightnin'," soliloquized Brazos, watching the superb form depart. "Turrible took with herself. Crazy aboot men. An' I cain't savvy what else. But doggone it! I like her."

Bilyen emerged from the store burdened with bags, of which he gave Brazos a generous share.

"You look kinda sheepish," he observed. "I'd be some worried if I didn't know you was goin' to meet June Neece today."

"Yeah. An' why June, if she's got a twin sister you cain't tell from her?"

"Oh, you can—if *they* help you. I said June because she's warm. Janis got the nickname Jan, meanin' January. An' you ought to remember this range in winter."

"Jan cause she's cold an' June cause she's hot! Say, Hank, this plot is thickenin' too darn deep. Suppose *they* wouldn't tip a feller off which one he happened to be makin'—to be talkin' to?"

"In thet case he'd be in deep, believe me."

Bilyen had a little ten-acre ranch on the Purgatory. A gray shack faced the rocky, swift-running stream, and the splendid vista of plains to the south and the noble slopes of foothills rising to the Rockies on the west.

"I can set on my doorstep an' ketch trout," boasted Hank. "An' look at thet!"

"Wal, I reckon I'll buy this place from yu an' settle down," drawled Brazos dreamily.

He was leaning over the rocky bank, still dreaming, when Hank came out of the shack accompanied by a man whose lean gray visage denoted the havoc of trouble if not of years. Brazos leaped erect, galvanized with an instinct in this meeting. It was to meet the penetrating gaze of tawny shadowed eyes.

"Howdy, Brazos Keene," was the man's greeting. "Hank has told me about you. I'm glad you were cleared of that trumped-up charge."

"Shore happy to meet you, Mr. Neece," responded Brazos warmly.

"Cowboy, you've got the cut of my son Allen—only you're older—an' there's something proved about you. Allen was young, reckless, inexperienced."

"Let's set down on the bank heah. Nice view. I'm gonna buy this place from Hank."

"Have you met my twin girls?"

"Not yet. I've heahed all above them, though. An' I gotta hand it to them, Mr. Neece. I shore look forward to meetin' them."

Neece sighed and gazed out across the greening brakes and swales to the open range. He was not old, nor feeble, but it appeared plain that the shock of disaster had broken him.

"Brazos, is what Bilyen tells me true?" he queried presently, with an effort.

"Gosh, I'd trust Hank every way 'cept talkin' aboot me."

At this juncture Brazos fell from humor to earnestness, changed by the dark meaning fire in Hank's eye.

"Hank says you're goin' to stay here an' look into the deal we Neeces have had."

"I shore am. It looks queer to me," declared Brazos, realizing that he was not averse to being drawn into the Neece mystery.

"That's good of you, cowboy. But why do you interest yourself in our troubles? You never knew Allen. You have not met my girls. Surface, who ruined us, is at the head of the strong combine of cattlemen in east Colorado. You're takin' a large order on yourself."

"Wal, thet's easy to answer," declared Brazos coolly. "Bodkin arrested me because he needed to hang the crime on somebody. He thought I was a stranger—a cowboy down on his luck. Surface wanted me hanged. For reasons I'm gonna find oot. If thet wasn't enough to rile Brazos Keene—wal, this rotten deal handed to yu an' yore three kids shore would be. Thet's all, Neece. I don't want to brag, but the ootfit chalked up some bad marks for themselves."

"You insinuate Surface is in some way connected with Bodkin?"

"Insinuate nothin'. I'm tellin' you, Mr. Neece." Brazos took out Holly's letter, carefully opened and smoothed and sorted the pages until he came to Renn Frayne's postscript. The passage that related to Surface he slowly and gravely read.

Neece showed that he still had flint in him to strike fire from. Manifestly

deeply stirred, he controlled himself admirably and very probably found his real self for the first time since disaster and grief had overcome him.

"No coincidence! That was my herd. It was last seen on the Canadian."

"Wal, I had thet hunch myself. What yu think, Hank?"

"Brazos Keene! So you dropped out of the sky with thet letter? Same old Brazos. By Gawd, I'm riled. I can see light an' it's red. Haw! Haw! There's some of us left. Surface, the—"

"Cheese it, Hank," interposed Brazos. "You're turrible profane. An' after all it may be a pore steer. Only it cain't be! But we gotta be shore. My idee is thet Frayne has tipped me a hunch damn important to eastern Colorado. Neece, I've heahed yore story from Hank. Just now, I only want to put one question. How an' when did yu lose thet money of Surface's yu got in Dodge?"

"Simple as a, b, c. I wanted cash. Got it, an' took it on the train in a satchel. The train was late. It didn't get into Las Animas till after midnight. Jerry, my stableboy, met me with the buckboard. We drove out toward the ranch. At the turn of the road, where the brook crosses an' the cottonwoods grow thick, I was held up by three men an' robbed."

"Ahuh. An' they shore knew where you'd been an' what you had."

"You bet they did."

"Was there anythin' at all familiar aboot them?"

"No. Strangers. They wore masks. But I never forget a voice, once I hear it. One of the three had a young nervous high-pitched voice, almost womanish. He called the burly man what sounded like 'Brad,' an' got cussed for doin' it. They were tough range riders."

"Brad," echoed Brazos, with a wild leap of his pulse. "Was thet all you heahed?"

"Yes. One of them batted me on the head. Jerry is not well yet from the beatin' they gave him."

"Did yu ever tell thet you heahed the name Brad—spoke by a young nervous high-pitched voice?"

"Come to think of it, I don't believe I ever did except maybe to Allen. How about that, Hank?"

"You never told me."

"It must have slipped my mind after I told Allen. You excite me so it all comes back clear."

"Wal, thet's all I want to heah this time. I'll walk aboot a bit an' think. Then I'll ride back to town an' keep my appointment with Jack Sain. Neece, do you like thet cowboy?"

"Jack Sain? Yes, I do, though I've only known him since the girls came home. He and Allen were friends, and—" Neeee's voice broke.

"Ahuh. Wal, I liked him too. Hank, I'll be heah in the mawnin'. An' Mr. Neece, don't get het up overly aboot this. I might be loco, but I swear we're on as black an' bloody a trail as I ever took up. So it behooves us to use our haids. Adios."

Chapter Four

Brazos Sees Double

RIDING slowly into Las Animas, Brazos Keene was oblivious of the glorious red and gold sunset and the numerous riders who passed by. He was still wrestling with that familiar old urge to ride away. Always the safest thing to do! Yet all the while

he knew he had committed himself to a stern duty that could only end in bloodshed—all the while he admitted the damnable fascination of the intriguing tragedy of the Neeces. Nevertheless, he still wanted the flaming spark.

When he arrived at the railroad station it was near the supper hour. The restaurant he sought had more prominence than the station itself and had been remodeled from an old adobe building he had difficulty in remembering. A second story had been added and the whole given a coat of whitewash. The building, the location and the neat sign were all attractive. A hitching-rail ran along in front.

Brazos dismounted, still too soberly pondering his predicament to awake to the momentous meeting at hand. Tying Bay to the rail, he stalked with his clinking step into the restaurant, expecting to see the cowboy with whom he had an appointment. But Jack Sain was not there. So far as he could see at a moment's notice, the place was empty.

Brazos slid a long leg over the bench and leaning upon the counter, looked about him. The restaurant had windows on three sides. Evidently the entrance into the kitchen was through the other side. There appeared to be a double counter in the center with benches all around, and small tables with chairs next to windows. The inside of this new restaurant only added to the spotless white attractiveness of the outside.

"Doggone! This is shore a hash joint. Cowboys shore will stuff themselves heah. Wonder who runs—"

At this juncture, two things happened simultaneously—Brazos remembered the Neece twins, and a door opened to admit a girl. Brazos never figured out what gave him such a shock, but the fact was that never in his life before had any girl produced the effect this one had on him.

She was slight and graceful of form, fair-haired, but not blond, and her face was white, sweet, sad. She had seen him before she entered and it struck Brazos she did not act like a waitress. She approached him, and putting her hands on the counter, she leaned forward. Her eyes were a tawny light brown. They engulfed Brazos. They searched his very soul. They appeared to Brazos to be the loveliest, saddest, most accusing eyes that ever shook the heart out of a poor cowboy.

A long-unfamiliar trouble suddenly fermented in Brazos's breast, but disturbing as it was, it was not so torturing as the fear her dark and troubled gaze aroused. Brazos was about to blurt out, to swear by heaven that he had not murdered Allen Neece.

"Brazos Keene," she affirmed.

"Wal, I—I was thet pore hombre when I come in heah," he said, fighting to smile, "but I cain't say now for shore."

"I am—June Neece," she returned, her low voice breaking a little.

"Aw, I wish I could say—" floundered Brazos. He did not know what he wanted to say.

"We are sorry you were arrested and locked up on—"

"Thet was nothin' atall, Miss Neece," interrupted Brazos with unconscious pathos. "Shore I hardly ever ride into a town but somethin' like thet happens. I'm a marked man. As for the cause this time, wal, I oughtn't to remind you aboot—but I swear to Gawd I'm innocent—"

"Don't," she interposed earnestly.

"If you had not been proved innocent, *I* would have known you were innocent." And she pressed a warm little hand in Brazos's upturned palm and left it there while she turned to call: "Jan, come here."

Then it appeared to the bewildered and thrilled cowboy that another June Neece walked into his heart. He was keen enough then to realize the nature of the malady that for once shunted aside his cool nonchalant self.

"Jan, this is he," said the first tawny-eyed vision to the second, and then to him, with a little smile: "My sister, Janis."

There was absolutely no telling these twin sisters apart. The one called Janis blushed and a bright glow suddenly burned out the shadow in her eyes.

"Brazos Keene? Oh, I am glad to meet you!" she exclaimed, and repeating her sister's action, she put her hand in his other as it lay on the counter.

"Wal, I shore am happy to meet yu-all," responded Brazos, coming to himself. There they stood, these unfortunate twins, holding his hands. It was a beautiful wonderful fact. Two pairs of tawny eyes instead of one pair gazed up at him with a soft warm light of faith, of sympathy. That was the moment Brazos Keene had wanted; that was the spark which set him afire.

The street door banged suddenly and Jack Sain came tramping in, his sleepy eyes alight, his smile infectious.

"Howdy, Brazos. I see you've got acquainted without my help," he remarked, as the girls withdrew their hands from Brazos's grip.

"Jack, we introduced ourselves all around," replied Janis gayly. June was silent, though she smiled at the young man as she looked at him.

"Wal, Sain, heah yu air, an' I clean forgot yu," drawled Brazos. "Yes, I've met yore friends an' am I glad? I've been tellin' them what tough luck I'd been playin' in not to be heah long ago. An' thet I'd shore make up for it."

"Jack, this Brazos cowboy is not so slow," said Janis teasingly.

"Slow! Never in this world could you apply that word to Brazos Keene. I see he's perked you up already. An' I'm darned glad."

"Wal, I'm kinda glad myself," said Brazos.

"Let's get our order in before the gang comes rollin' along," suggested Sain.

"Order? Gang? Say, am I loco?" ejaculated Brazos mildly.

"You are, an' it tickles me. I'll bet you couldn't ask June or Jan to serve you ham an' eggs—not to save your life."

"Ham an' eggs? Wal, I'll be doggoned! No, I cain't."

"Boys, what will you have?" asked one of the twins. The other had turned to the vanguard of hungry visitors now flocking from all directions.

"Aw, air you June or Janis?" queried Brazos helplessly.

"Never mind. Either of us can serve you. But hurry. We will be swamped soon."

"I was starvin' to death when I come in, but now I cain't eat," declared Brazos eloquently.

"Ha! Ha! Didn't I have a hunch?" laughed Sain, evidently delighted at something not apparent to Brazos. "I'll order double. Steak medium, mashed potatoes an' gravy, bread an' butter, coffee—an' tell that Mexican cook Billy the Kid is out here."

While the restaurant rapidly filled

with a crowd of various types and the young waitresses flitted to and fro from customers to kitchen and back again Brazos listened to his voluble friend and eagerly watched for June without any hope whatever of being able to tell which of the twins really was June.

When, however, Sain gave Brazos a dig in the ribs with his elbow, Brazos came out of his trance.

"Say, cowboy, go easy. I've been pitched off hawsses too often to have ribs of iron."

"Look behind you—at thet handsome dressed-up dude rancher," whispered Sain. "At the table."

"Ahuh. Wal—" replied Brazos, leisurely complying. "Kinda spick and span, at thet. But he's got a nice face. Who is he?"

"Henry Sisk, an' he has a nice face, I'm bound to admit. Too damn nice! Women like him a heap."

"Don't blame them. How aboot June an' Janis heah?"

"June couldn't see him with a telescope. But I got a hunch Jan likes him. Anyway, it's Jan he 'pears to be courtin'."

"How'n hell does he know which one he's courtin'?"

"He doesn't, unless they tell him, you can bet your roll on thet."

"How do *yu* tell, cowboy?" asked Brazos.

Sain reddened perceptibly, but was not ashamed of it. "I don't. Only the girls are decent enough to give me a hunch."

"Gosh! What'd yu do if they didn't steer yu?"

"Brazos, I'd be a plumb crazy cowboy, believe me. But don't get a wrong notion. Both June an' Janis have been friendly to me. Thet's all. I never even had nerve enough to hold June's hand. They're not the flirtin' kind, Brazos."

"So I see. Wal, how aboot this Henry Sisk? Is he a decent hombre?"

"Yes. I'm jealous, I reckon. Henry is young, good-lookin', rich, an' a fine fellow."

"Wal, I'll see if *I* approve of him," drawled Brazos coolly, as he swung sidewise over the bench. "Jack, yu order apple pie an' milk for me, if yu get a chance."

Brazos gave his heavy belt a hitch and took several slow strides over to the table where young Sisk sat, glowering at no one in particular. His frank face and dark eyes impressed Brazos favorably.

"Howdy, Sisk," said Brazos. "My pard heah told me who yu air. I'm Brazos Keene."

"How do. I saw you when I came in," returned the young rancher, not exactly incivilly though certainly awkwardly. He was surprised but he put out a hand willingly enough.

"I'm wonderin' if yu need a rider," replied Brazos, after the grip.

"I always need a rider who can work."

"Doggone! Work isn't my long suit," drawled Brazos with his captivating smile. "I cain't rope very wal, an' I'm no good atall at most cowboy jobs, an' I'd just starve before I'd dig fence-post holes. But if I do say it myself, I'm pretty fair with guns."

"Brazos, you're that thing impossible to find—a modest cowboy," said Sisk, laughing. "If you're serious, ride out to see me."

"Thanks, I'll do thet some day," concluded Brazos, and returned to his seat beside young Sain. That worthy gave Brazos an inquiring look. At this moment one of the girls brought a generous golden slice of apple pie and a

large glass of creamy milk. Brazos stared from these to the charming waitress.

"Do my pore eyes deceive me?"

"Didn't you order apple pie and milk?" she asked regretfully.

"I shore did. But I never even dreamed of such pie an' milk. Will yu duplicate the order, Miss Janis?"

Brazos found his favorite dessert and drink even more delicious than they looked. Both had disappeared as if by magic when the girl returned to set another plate of pie and brimming glass of milk before him.

"Miss Janis, all I want to know is can I come in heah as often as I want an' get a gorgeous supper like what I've had?" asked Brazos.

"Why, certainly—so long as you pay for it," she replied, trying to keep her face straight.

"But I'm broke a good deal. Money slips right through my fingers."

"This is a strictly cash business, Mr. Keene," she said demurely.

"Mexican Joe trusts me," importuned Brazos. "Aw, Miss Janis, I shore wouldn't want to be exclooded from this heah lovely place just on account of bein' financially embarrassed now an' then."

"Have you any references as to—to good credit and character?" she asked mischievously. "If you will bring these, we shall be glad to trust you. And by the way, I am not Janis, but June."

"Help!" prayed Brazos fervently, throwing up his hands.

Sain had heard this byplay, and he was all grin. "There ain't any help," he said.

"What's a fellow gonna do?" implored Brazos.

"I reckon the only thing a feller can do is impossible," returned Sain sagely, from which cryptic remark Brazos gathered no solace. They finished their dessert and had to wait to pay their bill.

"Wal, June," said Brazos, taking a chance on this sister and apparently hitting it right, "how much do we owe fer thet scrumptious supper—an' do we have to stand around on the corner ootside till mawnin' to see yu again?"

"Dollar eighty," replied June, as she took the bill he extended. "Twenty! Yes, you're broke!"

"Gosh, is thet a twenty?"

While June went to get change, Brazos saw Janis carry a tray to Sisk's table. There was no trouble in ascertaining the state of that young man's mind. Janis might have been in the solitude of the outside prairie for all he cared. He raised an earnest, appealing face to the girl. And when she had set the several dishes before him, Brazos's sharp eye caught him plucking at her hand. Janis smiled down upon him, but shook her head and left him.

"Heah you air, Mister Brazos Keene," drawled June at Brazos's elbow. She imitated his Texas accent perfectly, and did it with a straight face. Brazos held out his hand to take the change.

"Say, lady, I've handled girls turrible rough for less than thet," he said.

"Pooh! There's your change. I hope you will become a good customer."

"June, I'll eat myself to death," he rejoined softly. "When can I see yu again?"

"Breakfast time."

"But listen. There's nothin' for me to do heah. Only the saloons an' cairds. An' yu know, I'm Brazos Keene, doggone it! There's always some hombre layin' to shoot me in the back."

That was a happy lead for the cun-

ning Brazos to take. It was no falsehood and he had worked it often. June's eyes dilated. She gazed up at him, unconscious that she had already taken possession of him.

"We are off at ten. I'd like you to meet my aunt. She is Dad's sister, and lives with us upstairs."

Brazos rode out to the stable where Bilyen kept his horse while in town and, turning Bay over to the boy there, he drifted slowly up the street. Brazos could never control his heart but he had long been absolute master over his mind. And it behooved him to relegate this sweet insidious emotion to the background and begin cudgeling his brains.

At length, he entered the Call You gambling-den, a house that had once been pretentious and patronized by the range elect, but which now was the most sordid he had seen. He found the bar crowded and the gaming-tables mostly occupied. At one sat a gambler who would have attracted a less keen eye than Brazos's. His pale cold face, enhanced by his dark frock coat, drew attention to himself in a saloon full of range-garbed men. He espied Brazos not many seconds after Brazos singled him out. His glance held more than the cold curiosity of the gambler. Brazos accosted a cowboy on the way out.

"Say, bud, who's the cairdsharp?" he asked.

"Reckon they're all sharps in this camp— Thet's Howard."

"Where does he hail from?"

"Denver, they say."

"Howard— Is he the only flash gambler hereaboots?"

"You don't see many like him. An' he drops in from the train pretty often."

"I'm a stranger heah," explained Brazos.

"Wal, if you wasn't you wouldn't be askin' questions about Howard."

"Yeah? An' why not?"

"He ain't partial to curiosity."

"Aw, I see. Ladies' man, huh?"

"Cowboy, he's a killer in more ways than one. Haw! Haw!"

Brazos strolled unobtrusively around until he reached a point behind Howard. The gambler sat at table with three cowboys, playing poker, and he appeared to be ahead of the game.

"Excuse me, but I object to any one standing behind me," presently spoke up the gambler politely.

"Wal, thet's no wonder," drawled Brazos. "I'll go around on this side."

"What you hintin' at, cowboy?" growled one of the three youths at the table, gazing irritably up at Brazos.

"Gosh, I wasn't hintin'."

"Hell you wasn't. You better—"

"Shut up, before you say somethin'," fiercely interrupted the player next to the disgruntled one. "Don't you have no idee who you're talkin' to?"

After that the three cowboys were apparently blind to Brazos's presence, but the gambler was not, though he did not look up directly. Brazos watched him steadily, studied his features, his frock coat, his white, wonderfully dexterous hands. At length the gambler queried sarcastically:

"Don't you want to sit in?"

"Game's too slow for me."

"You appear mighty interested in watching it. I must ask you to sit in or get out."

"Wal, I'll tell you, Mister," replied Brazos. "I'd like to join yu, but it sorta riles me to play cairds with a caird-sharp when he's got a little gun hid high up under his coat on the left side."

The gambler dropped his cards, and his hand quivered while his eyes blazed cold fury upon Brazos.

"Careful, Howard," interposed the eldest of the three cowboys. "Don't be crazy enough to draw on thet feller."

"Who is he?" snapped the gambler, perceptibly relaxing.

"Wal, I ain't sayin'. He might be Billy the Kid."

"Brazos Keene's my name, if you want to know," said Brazos.

At this juncture, the losing member of the cowboy triangle leaped up, red of face, to slam his cards down on the table. "Whoever he is, he's busted up this game," he said.

"An' a damn good thing," agreed the third.

They abruptly left the gambler sitting alone. He raked in the few chips and little silver that his fellow players had abandoned. It was obvious that the presence of Brazos and the attention thus attracted to himself were distinctly unwelcome.

"Brazos Keene, eh?" he queried at length, sitting back to flash brilliant icy eyes upon Brazos.

"Yeah. An' I heahed one of yore victims call you Howard."

"That's my name," replied the gambler curtly.

"From up Denver way, I heah?"

"Where I hail from and what I do doesn't concern you, cowboy."

"Wal, I'm not so damn shore aboot the last."

"Were those fellows friends of yours?"

"Never saw them before. It was the way yu hide the little derringer gun thet riled me. I just naturally get cussed when I see thet kind of gun-packin'."

"So you broke up my game."

"I didn't intend to do thet. Yu talked powerful sarcastic, so I thought I'd call yu an' see if yu'd throw yore toy pistol," drawled Brazos, with glinting eyes that did not match his soft voice.

The gambler's face turned a shade grayer, either from anger or realization of what he had escaped.

"Curiosity has cost many men their lives."

"Shore. But not men like me. An' now I'll tell yu thet I had another reason for tryin' yu oot."

"I had a hunch you did. And what is it, Mister Keene?"

Brazos leaned close to the thin-lipped cold face and answered low:

"Ask Lura Surface."

It was a random shot that Brazos hazarded, but it went home. Howard growled his surprise and wrath, and turning on his heel strode by the watching line of curious men to the bar, where he ordered whisky.

Brazos backed against the wall and leaned there. He kept a narrowed gaze upon the gambler until he left the saloon. From sundry remarks which came to Brazos's ears he gathered that he had not hurt his status there by offending Howard.

Brazos pondered over the amaze and rancor Howard had evidenced. Indeed there must be something between Lura Surface and this handsome cardsharp who secreted a small gun in his breast pocket where he could snatch it swiftly. Something that probably was to Miss Surface's discredit. Brazos had nothing against her. He really liked her for her defense of him. Neverthe-

less, in his cunning, speculative mind she was being relegated to a place where she could not be considered with feeling. Brazos decided, however, to give her the benefit of a doubt.

A little before ten o'clock, Brazos wended a reluctant and yet impelled way toward the Twin Sombreros Restaurant. He could not have resisted the urge if he had wanted to. And he fought off the presage of calamity. When he arrived at the corner, he espied one of the twins talking to Henry Sisk. Indeed the two were arguing if not actually quarreling, from which fact Brazos deduced that this was Janis. There appeared to be several customers who were being waited upon by a Mexican girl.

Brazos mounted the side stairway leading up to the second story and knocked on the door, sure of the trepidation and another nameless sensation obsessing him. The door opened as if someone had heard his step outside. June stood there, in a white dress that had never been made in Las Animas. This apparition smiled upon him and Brazos dated his abject enthrallment from that moment. As always with him, when a thing was settled, inevitable, he found his cool, easy poise.

"Evenin', Miss June. I reckon I'm ahaid of time," he said.

"No. You are late. Come in."

She ushered Brazos into a cozy bright little sitting-room. "Auntie, this is our new-found friend, Mr. Brazos Keene," she said to a gray-haired woman who sat beside the lamp table. "My Aunt Mattie, Miss Neece—Daddy's sister."

Brazos made the lady a recipient of his most gallant bow and pleasantest smile. "I shore am glad to meet yu, Miss Neece," he drawled, as he bent to take the hand she hesitatingly offered. "Yu favor yore brother an' I'd have known yu."

"For the land's sake! June, this nice-looking boy can't be your terrible Brazos Keene," exclaimed the aunt.

"Yes, he is, Auntie."

"Aw, Miss Neece, don't believe everythin' yu heah," implored Brazos honestly. "I'm not turrible atall."

"I don't believe you are. I'm glad to meet you. Janis filled my old head with nonsense. Said you were a black-browed giant—very fierce to see."

"Air yu shore it was Janis?" inquired Brazos.

"Yes, indeed. June has been telling me the—well, I'll not give her away. But your ears must have burned. Take his hat, June—and hadn't you better lay aside that cumbersome gun?"

"Wal, lady, I wouldn't feel dressed proper if I did thet— There, I'll slip it around so you cain't see it."

"Thank you, I—I guess that's better," she replied, rising. "Mr. Keene, you met my brother Abraham?"

"I did, an' I shore like him."

"June tells me you cheered him up," she went on in hurried earnestness. "And Dave Wesley called on me this afternoon. He had just ridden by Bilyen's ranch. He said he had not seen my brother so near like his old self. Oh, if you are responsible for that, I thank you."

"Lady, I'm afraid I am responsible," rejoined Brazos seriously. "An' I shore hope I didn't overdo it."

"Have you any ground to believe Abraham's loss can be retrieved?" she asked beseechingly.

"I cain't explain. It's what a cowboy calls a hunch. I've trailed up a good many of my hunches an' never lost oot on one yet."

"Only a hunch! Oh, I had prayed you might have really learned something," she returned sadly.

"Miss Neece, I cain't talk aboot it now. All I can say is for yu to go on hopin' and prayin', too."

"Perhaps Abraham will tell me. I'll see him tomorrow. Good night, Mr. Brazos Keene. Somehow you inspire me strangely. June, I'll leave you young folks alone. Good night, dear."

Brazos found himself alone with June Neece, and his five endless years of wandering for he knew not what were as if they had never been.

"You must understand Auntie, and Jan and me," said June gravely. "It is not the loss of Dad's fortune and Twin Sombreros Ranch that hurts so terribly. It was Dad's broken heart. All these years he had worked for us. The blow crushed him. And he was sinking under it. Then Allen's sudden ghastly death—"

Her face was white and her big eyes shone darkly tragic up at him.

"Never mind, June," interposed Brazos feelingly. "I reckon I understand. It's hard. But you must bear up. I've had my grief. An' I'm a livin' proof thet grief passes—an' thet joy an' hope come back."

"You have had trouble?" she asked softly.

"For five years I've been a driven cowboy—an' my trouble came to an end today—when I met yu."

"Me? Oh!" She warmed wonderingly to that. "Tell me your story."

"Some day, when I reckon I dare."

They stood by the table, with glances locked, and constraint overcoming the simplicity of that meeting. June turned away with a blush, only to be drawn again to look at him, as if to make sure the situation was real.

"Brazos Keene! To think I'm alone with *him!* Oh, I've heard who and what you are. It has been on the lips of everybody all day long."

"Wal, I hope it's goin' to be good for yu thet I am Brazos Keene," returned he mournfully. "But maybe if I was Henry Sisk or Jack Sain I would have more chance for you to like me."

"Brazos, don't be hurt," she said hurriedly, and put an appealing hand on his arm. "I'm glad. I've always dreamed I'd—" she broke off, blushing. "I'm Western, you know. And I saw a good deal of the life here before Dad sent me away to school. I've a weakness for—for desperadoes. So has Janis— Only it seems so strange to be with you—to *know*. Who would ever take you for—what they call you? No wonder Auntie could not believe her eyes! You do not look it."

"Wal, what do I look, then?" he queried, a little gruffly, for once weakening to permit discussion of this delicate subject.

"I haven't really dared to look at you—close," she rejoined shyly. "Come here, your back is to the light— There. Brazos, at the risk of seeming a flatterer like Lura Surface, I must say you're a stunning-looking cowboy. You've a clean, tanned, boyish, handsome face—nice curly hair almost blond, the kind any girl would like to run her fingers through— Oh, Brazos! It's a little gray over your temples! And your eyes take something from your winning smile and soft Southern drawl."

"My Gawd, June, you must have kissed the blarney stone. Now, what's wrong with my eyes?"

"Nothing. Janis said they were gray. Now I see they're blue. You're making sheep's eyes at me now, Brazos Keene.

But you can't fool me. Those eyes could be terrible."

"Could they? But I'm comin' back at yu, June Neece. There's nothin' wrong with yu atall. An' to say yu're the prettiest girl I ever saw in my life isn't sayin' what I mean. I reckon it's the class yu was born with an' somethin' yu got away at school."

"We *are* getting on," she replied demurely.

"Yu mean we're gettin' some place where I've no right to be?"

"Come sit here," she returned, and led him to a little sofa in the corner. They gazed at each other again, questioningly, yet with no hint of doubt or uncertainty. There was something vital, compelling, drawing, that made no allowance for short acquaintance.

"June, I'm gonna be honest. Meetin' yu has thrown me plumb oot of my saddle."

"It means much to me, Brazos—I don't know what."

"Yu're countin' on yore hopes of what I can do for yore dad?"

"Yes. But if we were out home—at Twin Sombreros—and if we had no trouble—I—think I would feel the same."

"Girl, yu cain't be in love with Jack Sain?"

"Who said I was?" she answered, smiling. "I like Jack. We played together when we were kids."

"Wal, I was afraid—I reckon I thought yu might care more'n thet. Jack is crazy aboot yu, which is no wonder."

"I'm sorry, Brazos. But I didn't flirt with him as Jan did with Henry Sisk. I'm sorry for Jack in more ways than one. He has had one misfortune after another. And the last is too bad. He had just found a good job after being idle for months, then lost it."

"How'd he lose it?"

"Al said he was running after Lura Surface. Her father caught them meeting on the road one night. He raised Cain and had Jack discharged."

"Ahuh. The Surfaces don't mix up in this thing—aw, no, not atall! June, I want to ask some questions aboot Allen. Were yu in his confidence?"

"Yes. Allen was afraid to tell Dad what he was doing. And he didn't even tell Jan."

"Ahuh. Wal, if I figure Allen correct, he was trackin' the ootfit thet ruined yore father."

"He was on the trail of the three men who held Dad up that night and robbed him."

"Did he tell yu anythin'?"

"Not much. Oh, let me recall it," she went on excitedly. "They did not belong around Las Animas. But they rode here often. He had nothing to go by except—except the night they robbed Dad, one of them—a boy with a girl's voice called another of the three by the name Brad. Allen said Dad told him that."

"Yes, June, your Dad told me. And here's the funny part of it. One of the three hombres who held me up thet night called his pard Brad, or a name thet sounded like thet. By Gawd! Those men murdered Allen. He was on their trail. Did anyone else but yu know Allen was workin' on yore father's case?"

"Yes. It was found out. I remember Allen was sore because the loungers around town called him the cowboy detective. Allen kept the secret of what he suspected and had learned—except from me—but anyone could have guessed what he was doing. He was so dark and grim and determined."

"June, do yu reckon Raine Surface heahed what Allen was up to?"

"Lura would have heard it, surely."

"Shore, she'd tell her father. June, can yu remember any more Allen told yu?"

"Let me think. Yes—the night before Allen was killed he had supper with me downstairs. It was late, almost time for Jan and me to come off duty. Allen asked me if I'd seen a handsome hard-faced cowgirl, small and slim with eyes like black diamonds. She looked the real thing in riders, he said. I told Allen no girl of that description had come into the restaurant. Then he said she had made up to him in the Happy Days saloon. He seemed curious, yet distrustful. But he didn't tell me any more."

"A cowgirl! Wal, now I wonder— An' thet's all, June?"

"I wouldn't say all by any means. Only it's all I can remember now. Perhaps when I see you again—"

"Thet'll be in the mawnin', I reckon. But don't worry aboot me. I'm takin' over Allen's job of huntin' for the three hombres who robbed yore dad—an' murdered Allen—an' held me up. An' shore as death, one of thet three was a girl with a high-keyed voice!"

Chapter Five

Brazos Gives Warning

BRAZOS espied Lura Surface's white horse tied among the pine saplings before he turned in off the road. He found her most effectively placed in a green-shaded, brown-matted nook opening upon the bank of the swift brook. Bareheaded, her red hair flaming, her strange eyes alight, her lissome full-breasted figure displayed to advantage in her riding-habit, she made a picture that struck fire in Brazos, despite his cool preconception.

"Good afternoon, Miss Surface. I shore am sorry to be late," he drawled, and throwing aside his sombrero he sat down and slid to his elbow beside her.

The green eyes devoured him, for nothing except her effect upon him. Yet her quick breath, and the quick rise of her breast, betrayed a little shock at his nearness. She was used to men, but not of his stripe, Brazos thought. His gun had bumped her knee.

"Howdy, Brazos Keene," she said, with a smile that enhanced her hard bright charm.

"Wal, I do pretty good, considerin'," returned Brazos. "Cowboys don't often fall into such luck as this."

"I came early. Had a quarrel with Father. But I thought you'd never get here."

"Wild hawsses couldn't have kept me away from yu, Lura."

"Same old cowboy blarney."

"Ump-um. If yu take me for any other cowboy, wal, we won't get nowhere atall."

"Where will we get if I take you as I did yesterday?"

"An' how was thet?"

"A lonely cowboy, down on his luck, unjustly jailed, suspicious of men—and needing a friend."

"Thet's takin' me true, Lura. But I cain't say I'm without friends altogether."

"You could always get women friends, Brazos."

"Shore. Thet's my trouble. I almost

didn't come today."

"Why?"

"Wal, yu shore took my eye. An' I knew if I saw yu again I'd go loco."

"Loco? What's that? I've heard the word."

"Loco is a weed hawsses eat sometimes an' go oot of their haids."

"Humph! I can just see *you* going loco!" she ejaculated. "Why, you're the coolest cowboy I ever met. And Lord knows I've met some cool ones."

"Wal, suppose at thet I did go loco?"

"I'd be delighted. You're different, Brazos. Oh, I was sorry when I thought they'd hang you! And what a thrill I had yesterday! Scared too? Brazos Keene—the notorious Brazos Keene! But I'm not so scared now."

"Gosh, lady, I'm as harmless as a kitten— So yu'd be delighted if I went plumb loco aboot yu?"

"I'd love it," she said slyly, yet with a catch in her voice. Her brazen coquetry had not heretofore been used to subjugate gunmen.

"Lura Surface, I'm not gonna do it. I reckon I'll get over this meetin' with yu. But I won't risk another."

"Oh," she pouted, blushing becomingly. "And why not?"

"Yu're just my dish of a woman an' if I tasted yu once I'd have nothin' to look forward to but starvation."

"I never satisfied any man's hunger yet. But I might—yours."

Brazos sat up, and with swift strong arms he drew her back so that she lay almost flat with her head on his breast. Then he held her, gazing down upon a suddenly paling face and eyes that dilated strangely between fear and desire. Her red lips parted. But she was thoroughbred in that, as she had invited this onslaught, she would not show the white feather.

"Lura, yu shore oughtn't play at love with a hombre like me."

"Who says I'm playing?"

"Shore yu air. An' I've got sense enough to see it an' decency enough to spare yu what many a cowboy I've known would take."

"You think I'm a flirt?"

"Wal, I never call women names, onless they're nice names. Yu're powerful seductive, Lura, turrible appealin', an' pretty isn't the word. Yu've got a devastatin' kind of beauty. If I let go of myself now, an' fell to kissin' yu, as I reckon I might do by force, I'd be a gone goslin'. I might fall stark ravin' mad in love with yu. An' where'd thet get me, Lura? I'm Brazos Keene, only a notch or two behind Billy the Kid in range standin'. Yu're daughter of Raine Surface, rich rancher, an' yu're the belle of this corner of Colorado. Suppose such a wild thing as yore fallin' in love with me. Yu couldn't never marry me."

"I could run away with you," she panted, her eyes like green stars.

"Wal, thet's too wild for even me to reckon with, an' yu wouldn't. So when it comes to Brazos Keene just yu figure thet he's not gonna dream such dreams. At the same time, I'd like yu to know it'd be damn sweet an' wonderful to tear yu to pieces."

"Well, since you're not going to try —please let me up," she said, serious over what seemed a greater conquest than she had hoped for. If he resisted her, at least he paid tribute to her charm. And perhaps he grew all the more desirable for that. She sat up, scarlet of face.

"I wouldn't let yu off thet easy next time," he warned.

"You are a queer one. What'd you meet me for, if not to make love? Who

ever heard of a cowboy who didn't?"

"Wal, heah's one. Lura, could yu get me a job ridin' for yore dad?"

"Oh, I'd like that. In fact I thought of it. I said to Father: 'Why not get this Keene cowboy to ride for us?' He flouted the idea. 'That gun-throwing desperado from New Mexico! I guess not!' And I said: 'But, Father, you never care how tough cowboys are coming from Dodge or Abilene.' And he shut me up."

"Ahuh. He's got a grudge against Western riders, I reckon. Wal, thet's tough on us from over the divide."

"I can't understand it, Brazos," she replied as she straightened her disheveled hair. "Riders like you are not tough or low-down. You may be wild, dangerous, and all that. But Father's excuse is queer. Why, he has hired rustlers and even outlaws when we ranched outside of Abilene. He had some bad outfits—bad in another sense. That's why he sold out and came to Colorado."

"Reckon I savvy thet. Bad ootfits sometimes hurt a cattleman's reputation," replied Brazos casually.

"Indeed they do. Father lost friends in Kansas. He had one serious lawsuit during which some pretty raw things were hinted against him. He shot a cattleman named Stearns."

"Kill him?" queried Brazos, as if shocked.

"No. Stearns recovered, I'm glad to say."

"Wal, yore dad didn't strike me as the shootin' kind."

"He's not," the girl returned, with some note akin to contempt. "Unless he's got the edge on the other man. Why, he was scared to go into town for fear he'd run into Allen Neece."

"Neece? Thet was the cowboy I was accused of killin'. Did yu know him, Lura. Did yu know him very well?"

"Yes. I liked him better than any boy I knew. I was terribly shocked at his death."

"Reckon yu would be. From all I heah, Neece was a nice chap. Did he ever ride for yu?"

"No. Father not only wouldn't have Allen but ran him out of the job he had."

"What for?"

"Allen was in love with me."

"Aw, I see. Shore tough for Allen—an' then gettin' murdered in the bargain. Who could have done thet job, Lura? Some cowboy jealous of yore likin' for Allen?"

"Hardly. No cowboy ever liked me *that* well."

"When did yu see Allen last?" asked Brazos, apparently growing interested.

"The very night he was murdered. I was in town. I met him coming out of the Show Down Saloon. He was half drunk. Allen took to drink after the Neeces lost Twin Sombreros. He didn't see me. And I didn't stop him for the good reason that he was with a little black-eyed wench in boy's pants. She was hanging on to Allen as if she'd lose him. I had seen her once before somewhere. I think on the street in Dodge. Not the dance-hall type, but a pretty hard-faced hussy. I'll always remember her and think she had something to do with Allen's murder."

"Shore thet might be. She scraped acquaintance with Allen, got him to drinkin', an' had a couple of hombres ootside, maybe, waitin' to rob him. I've know thet to happen to many a cowboy."

"It'll never happen to Allen Neece again, poor devil. If it hadn't been for that black-eyed girl my conscience would hurt me."

"Yore what?" drawled Brazos, with his slow smile.

"I daresay you think I have no conscience—or any womanly virtues."

"Nope. But yu don't need anythin' with yore good looks. Lura, yu've made me doggone interested in young Neece's case."

"Have you seen his doll-faced sisters—the twins?" she asked quickly, and the green eyes showed her true nature.

"Did he have sisters? I didn't know. Tough on them, I reckon."

"Humph! They didn't seem to take it so hard. They didn't even stop slinging hash—not for a day."

"Wal, yu cain't never tell," said Brazos, dropping his head. What little regard he had felt for Lura Surface went into eclipse.

"I mustn't stay longer, Brazos," said the girl, consulting her watch. "Father watches me closely and times my rides. I told him I wanted to ride into town, but he wouldn't hear of it. Here we have spent an hour—the last part of which didn't keep the promise of the first. When shall we meet again?"

"I reckon never, Lura. But thanks for this once. When I'm far away, I'll think I might have kissed yu, an' kick myself."

"Oh, don't go away. Why, I've only met you! Tell me, when?"

"Wal, maybe some day I'll meet yu in town an' weaken. But, lady, yu've been warned."

"I'll take the risk. It has been different from—well, other times I've met boys here." She mounted gracefully to her saddle, aware of his appreciation, and said, with dark-green provocative eyes on him, "Adios, Brazos Keene."

Brazos watched her ride away with only one regret—that he liked her well enough to be sorry she was innocently involved in a sinister plot that dimly shadowed her father, and which she had unwittingly made clearer.

Brazos rode back to town, for once not seeing the afternoon sun flooding the range with golden glory. When he dismounted at the corral where Bilyen had first taken him, and turned Bay over to the stableboy, he suddenly had an inspiration:

"Pedro, did yu know Allen Neece?"

"Si, señor," replied the Mexican.

Further queries rewarded Brazos with some significant facts. Allen Neece had come to the stable on the night he was murdered. He was on foot and under the influence of drink though not by any means drunk. He had to wake Pedro to get his horse. It was not until Neece had mounted and ridden off that Pedro had noted a companion—a boy on a black horse, waiting. This last information seemed of tremendous importance to Brazos. That boy was the cowgirl June Neece had mentioned and the girl in rider's garb that Lura Surface had seen with Allen.

Brazos strode uptown to the restaurant. The hour was early and only a few customers were at supper. One of the twins came to Brazos and though he thought he could trust her smile and bright eye, he would not take a chance.

"Wal, which one air yu?"

"Brazos, what has happened?" she whispered, leaning over the counter.

He answered low: "June, I've been oot to meet Lura Surface an' the hunch I got from her riled me."

"Oh—what—"

"Never mind now. But don't worry aboot me or yore dad. Please fetch me some supper."

That night Brazos haunted the main

street and the saloons. The cowboys and cattlemen on the street, coming in or going home, the drinkers and bartenders in the saloons, the gamblers at the tables and the loungers around, and more than one dark-garbed group who drank by themselves—all heard that Brazos Keene was hunting for someone. It was spoken first by a man who had seen Keene enter Las Animas saloons in years gone by. Then it passed from lip to lip.

Brazos's stalk was no pose, yet he did it deliberately. Nevertheless he had little hope that he would encounter the trio who now loomed large in the mystery of Allen Neece's murder. They would be out on the range, hidden in the hills, or back east in the gambling-dens of Dodge or Abilene. They would be in close touch with the man or men who were back of this crime. It might well be that they would be summoned presently to do away with Brazos Keene.

In the Happy Days saloon Brazos came unexpectedly upon Bodkin, whom he had not seen since the day of his release by Kiskadden. The ex-deputy had just set down his glass on the bar. Sight of Brazos cut short words he was speaking to a companion.

"Hey, Bodkin, heah yu air," called Brazos, so ringingly that the inmates of the crowded saloon went silent. "Where yu been?"

"I've been around town as usual," replied Bodkin, turning a dirty white under his swarthy skin.

"Like hell yu have. I been lookin' for yu. Have yu been put back as deputy sheriff of this heah town?"

"No. Kiskadden fired me, you know, an' then he resigned. The Cattlemen's Association haven't made no appointment yet. But I'm expectin' it."

"Yu're expectin' what?" drawled Brazos with scathing insolence.

"To be elected sheriff."

"Aw, hell! Elected? Who's electin' yu? Not the citizens of this heah town. They won't be asked. If they would be, yu'd never get a vote, onless from some of yore hired hands. An' who's yore Cattlemen's Association ootside of Raine Surface?"

"Miller, Henderson, Sprague—all big cattlemen," returned Bodkin hurriedly. "Inskip was one—but he quit."

"Ahuh. An' when does this ootfit aim to settle yore appointment—an' also yore hash?"

"They meet tomorrow night."

"Wal, tell them I'll call an' cast one vote against yu."

"I'll do thet, Keene."

"An' while yu're carryin' messages from me, take this for yoreself. If yu're appointed sheriff I'm gonna see red. An' this for yore hired hand, Barsh. He better keep oot of my way."

Backing through the swinging doors, Brazos left that saloon to break its silence with a subdued sound of excited voices, and then an angry protesting roar from Bodkin. Brazos had scarcely turned up the street when the doors banged behind him.

"Hold on, Brazos. It's Hank." And Bilyen, keen and glinting of eye, joined him. "My Gawd, cowboy, but you burned Bodkin up! What's the deal?"

"Howdy, Hank. Aw, I was only bluffin' Bodkin, an' takin' thet chance to set the town talkin' aboot Surface an' his Cattlemen's Association."

"Brazos, you've got goin'," rejoined Bilyen shrewdly. "You shore are. You never was one to talk wild. Mebbe you was throwin' a bluff, but you had somethin' behind it."

"Wal, enough to want to rile myself

up. Hank, I was wantin' to see yu. If yu cain't give me the lowdown on rustlin' in eastern Colorado, find oot for me pronto."

"I know, Brazos. Got thet this very day. Kiskadden an' Inskip told me. They're shore interested. As a matter of fact, I was surprised. I reckon you won't be though— Brazos, there 'pears to be considerable cattle stealin' in small numbers, takin' in all the big brands on this range. Too slick an' bold to be the work of any gang but real rustlers under a smart leader. Kiskadden an' Inskip lost three hundred haid last month. The Star Brand not so many. Small ootfits down the Purgatory none at all. Henderson's ootfit rarin' aboot a big drive on their Circle Dot Brand. Miller has lost considerable haid. Sprague an' the big cattlemen up on the slopes hard hit for these times. All this last month, an' the herds driven over into Kansas an' shipped east."

"Ha! Ha!" laughed Brazos mirthlessly.

"Say, what's so funny about thet?" demanded Bilyen, affronted.

"Struck me funny."

"What did?"

"The way my hunches work oot," returned Brazos grimly. "But for some men it's aboot as funny as death. Hank, will yu meet me oot west of town at sunup in the mawnin'?"

"Yes, I will, cowboy. Where?" answered Bilyen soberly.

"At thet old cabin on the hill—where Allen Neece was murdered," said Brazos tersely, and abruptly strode away toward Mexican Joe's place, where he had a room.

Next morning found Brazos at the cabin, waiting for Hank Bilyen. The old cowman arrived in good time and greeted his young friend.

"Now we're here, Brazos, what are we going to do?" he asked.

"Wal, I want yu to help me go over this ground with a fine-tooth comb."

"Tracks, eh? I ain't takin' any back seat for you, Brazos Keene. Never was one to hobble hawsses."

They rode into the clump of trees and tied their horses.

"Allen Neece was found in thet cabin. But accordin' to the doctors he wasn't killed there. What I want powerful to find an' shore expect to find is a small boot track."

"Ahuh. Wal, let's get goin'."

They entered the cabin, with riders' eyes searching the ground for tracks. Hank got down on his knees to scrutinize those just inside the door. He was slow.

"Reckon them was made the mawnin' Bodkin found you heah," he said, at length.

"An' heah's my track, goin' an' comin' back. I slept on thet bunk."

They searched the musty dry cabin as hunters of treasure might have. "Well, nothin' heah," said Brazos. "If thet little boot marked the dust heah it's been tracked over. Let's go up in the loft."

The loft covered half the space under the roof and had been built of peeled poles laid close together. It shook under their weight. The light was dull up there, but they could distinguish objects. Bilyen concluded that the murderers had climbed the ladder up to a point level with the loft and had shoved the body headfirst back upon the poles. A dark smear of blood ran along one of them.

"What's thet in the corner?" asked Brazos, and crawled carefully back. He found a rope, a lasso, that had evidently been hurriedly flung there with-

out being coiled. He crawled back to Bilyen with it.

"Look, Hank—must have been the rope which made the marks on his arms," said Brazos. "Take it down, Bilyen, while I investigate some more."

Brazos went over every inch of that loft without further discovery. When he got down he found Hank sitting in the door, studying the rope. Brazos knelt to scrutinize with him. They were tense and silent. Next to a gun and a horse, the lasso was a cowboy's most treasured possession.

"Wal, what you make oot?" queried the Texan gruffly of Brazos.

"Lasso all right. Manila, wal made. Same as any one of a hundred."

"Yes, an' what else, cowboy?"

"It shore never was used on a calf or a cow or a steer."

"Hell no. Brazos, it ain't new. It's been tied on a saddle fer a long time. A cowboy riata never used by a cowboy! Does thet say anythin' to you?"

"Ump-umm. Don't talk so much, Hank. Let's go all over the ground heah."

Every path and bare spot and thin-grassed bit of ground out to the road and along the road to east and west they carefully inspected.

"Now thet clump of trees," said Brazos. "Hank, heah's where I run into the three hombres." He related the incident, laying stress on the name he had heard and the nervous young high-pitched voice. Bilyen's silence attested to the impression Brazos's story made on him.

They proceeded to the patch of timber. "Aboot heah is where their hawsses stood."

It appeared to be a scraggy bit of dead and dying timber, extending back a considerable distance. Brazos directed Hank to search there, while he began at the farther end. Brazos had something in his mind. At the farthest point, under the largest and thickest-foliaged of the trees, he found a bare spot of ground. At sight of hoof tracks and tiny boot tracks his blood leaped. Down he knelt and almost smelled at the boot tracks.

Of all the innumerable imprints by riders' boots that Brazos had ever studied these were the smallest. No cowboy ever had small enough feet to take a boot that made these tracks. Ten-year-old boys did not wear boots made to order. These had been left by a girl. Brazos knelt there as if he were reading a dark page of the book of life.

"What'n hell air you porin' over, cowboy?" asked Bilyen curiously, as he came upon Brazos.

"There! My hunch was true."

Bilyen did not utter a word but made a careful inspection of the spot, and then faced Brazos with a curious fire in his eye.

"Cowboy, there's a girl mixed in this deal."

"Shore."

"An' she come way back heah to be far from thet cabin. An' she set her hawss for a while. An' she got off heah—an' heah she walked to and fro. *Nervous!* An' heah she stood still, her heels diggin' in. Rooted to the spot, hey, Brazos? An' there she got on again, light-footed an' quick— Wal, Brazos, I'll be damned!"

"So will I, Hank," rejoined Brazos ponderingly. "Get me some little sticks so I can measure this track."

"Brazos, I reckon you won't be lookin' for a cowgirl answerin' to this boot track? Not much!"

"Not any at all," returned Brazos

with a cold, steely note in his voice.

"She was the one of them three hombres with the young nervous high-pitched voice. She was afraid of the risk. She was goin' to bore you, Brazos!"

"I shore gotta meet thet sweet little lady."

"How you goin' aboot thet, Brazos?" asked Hank, scratching his scrubby beard.

"Ride the line an' take a look at the gamblin'-halls."

"They got cash an' they ain't cowmen. Wal, when you find out where their money comes from you'll be gettin' hot."

"Hot? Say, old-timer, I'm burnin' right now! But I'll cool off. I don't like the idee of a hard nut of a cowgirl in this deal. I might have to wing her. I did thet once to a woman who was drawin' on me an' I'll never forget her scream."

"How you figure her part in this?"

"How do yu?"

"Plain as print. She an' her two pards air from oot of town—she's a good-looker an' likely enticin' to cowboys. Allen Neece was easy took in by girls. He liked a drink, too, same as all the boys. Wal, this gang of three was after him, for reasons that bear strong in this deal. She got to Allen—an' the rest was easy."

"I figure aboot like thet, Hank," returned Brazos thoughtfully. "Beside I know more'n yu. The night Allen was killed he walked down to the barns to get his hawss. Pedro said there was a boy with him—a boy on a black hawss —an' they hung ootside. They rode away. Now what happened is this. If I remember correct, thet night was nice an' warm, with a moon an' the frogs peepin'—just the night for a rendezvous oot heah. But they never got heah. Thet Brad an' his other pard roped Allen an' dragged him off his hawss. The fall killed Allen, but they didn't know it. They packed him up heah, shot him—an' left him in the cabin."

"While the girl waited heah under this tree nervous an' sick," added Hank.

"Nervous, anyhow. Wal, she had—good reason to be nervous," declared Brazos darkly. "Just aboot then I rode into the deal."

"Funny how things work oot. It shore don't pay to be crooked— Brazos, who's behind all this?"

"Hank, yu're a curious cuss," drawled Brazos, carefully depositing in his pocket the little sticks with which he had measured the foot track. "Let's go back to town an' have breakfast."

On the return trip they did not exchange another word until they got by Twin Sombreros Ranch, when Bilyen curtly asked Brazos, "Did you see Surface standin' in the door?"

"Shore. He looked big as a hill."

"Must be one of these early birds, eh?" rejoined Bilyen, his voice filled with sarcasm.

From there on into town Brazos found his tongue and asked his comrade many questions regarding the possibility of one of the big cattlemen of the range being the genius and backer of a bold and clever gang of rustlers.

"Kinda hipped on thet idee, ain't you?" rejoined Bilyen, who seemed nettled that Brazos did not tell all he knew.

"Reckon I am. It's a great idee."

"Wal, it wasn't born with you, Brazos. I had thet long ago."

"Hank, yu're from Texas an' no fool," mused Brazos, as if apologizing

for Bilyen. "Will yu swear to it?"

"I shore will—to you. But I wouldn't want to yell it oot loud in the Happy Days or the post office."

"Why wouldn't yu, old-timer?"

"I want to live long enough to see Abe an' the twins back at their ranch."

"Ahuh. Wal, I'll yell it—tonight at thet Cattlemen's Association meetin'."

Brazos avoided the restaurant that night and had his supper at Mexican Joe's. Afterward he began the gamut of the saloons, where he pretended to drink. And at nine o'clock, when he mounted the steps up to the Odd Fellows Hall, he pounded on the door with the butt of his gun.

"Open up heah!" he shouted.

The door was promptly unlocked, allowing Brazos to enter, a little unsteady on his feet. But seldom had Brazos Keene been any more sober and cool than at this moment. He needed the sharpness of vision and wit of a dozen cowboys. Much might depend on this venture.

"Excuse me, gennelmen, for intrudin' heah. I'll leave it to yu whether what I say is important or not."

A dozen or perhaps fifteen men sat around a long table, upon which stood bottles and glasses and a box of cigars. Brazos swept the group in one glance, to recognize Henderson and Surface. He had never seen Sprague, but identified him from Bilyen's description. Other faces were familiar. And lastly, to his surprise, he saw Inskip.

"It's that cowboy, Brazos Keene," spoke up one of the men.

"Drunk! Put him out," called Surface, rising from his seat.

"Go slow, Mister Surface, aboot puttin' me oot," drawled Brazos, his eyes on the rancher like slits of fire. "I'm not drunk. Shore I've had a few nips just to make me talky. But yu'll find me level-haided enough."

"Let him have his say, Surface," advised Henderson, intensely interested.

"Go ahaid, Brazos," interposed Inskip dryly.

"But the intrusion of a drunken cowboy! Intolerable," protested Surface, and as he sank back into his seat it was not anger alone that marked his sallow visage.

"Speak up, Keene," ordered Henderson. "Be brief and to the point."

Brazos, having gained his point of entrance, changed visibly, and sheathed his gun, though he left his hand on the butt.

"Gentlemen, I picked oot this meetin' as the proper place an' time to make a statement shore to be interestin' to all Colorado cattlemen," he began swiftly, with his glance roving as swiftly. "It so happens thet events kinda gravitate to me. An honor I never cared for but was thrust on me! The cattle situation heah on this range from the Spanish Peaks down to the Old Trail is nothin' new to me. I recall five situations like it. Yu all know what caused the Lincoln County War in New Mexico. Yu all shore have heahed of the Sewall McCoy combine with Russ Slaughter. On the one hand there was the educated, rich, smooth, cunnin' gentleman-rancher, an' on the other the dyed-in-the-wool rustler, hard as flint, an' leader of as bloody an ootfit of cattle thieves as ever forked hawsses. Yu-all may have heahed too what I had to do with trailin' an' breakin' thet double ootfit. I mention it heah, not to brag, but to give some

importance to what I'm aboot to tell yu."

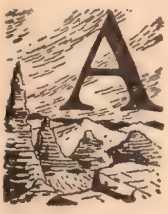
Brazos let that sink in. He did not rest his gaze upon any one of the fascinated faces of his listeners, but he missed nothing of the effect of his words.

"Yu cattlemen face the same situation heah on this range," he went on impressively. "An' if yu don't break it up there's no tellin' how powerful an' all-embracin' it'll grow. Short an' sweet then, gentlemen, there's a cattleman on this range who's workin' like Sewall McCoy. He's yore friend an' maybe pardner. I'm not insultin' any of yu heah or any citizen of Las Animas. 'Cause what I know cain't be proved at this tellin'. But it's the truth yu can gamble on. Thet's all gentlemen. Take it for what it's worth."

Slowly Brazos, while ending this biting speech, backed to the door, limning on his mind's eye the strangely contrasting visages there. Then with a leap he was out the door, to bound down the stairs.

Chapter Six

Brazos Goes the Rounds



AS THE train whistled for Las Animas the conductor observed Brazos Keene buckling a heavy gun belt around his slim waist. And the several passengers who had scraped acquaintance with the handsome cowboy in his new suit stared aghast.

"That nice curly-haired cowboy!" whispered one, a girl in her teens.

"Who would have thought it!" ejaculated her mother.

"Cowboy, it's two days yet till July Fourth," remarked the conductor.

"Wal, heah at Las Animas I don't feel right withoot my hardware on," drawled Brazos, smiling at the girl.

"Who are you?" she asked eagerly.

"Sorry to confess, lady. But I been sailin' under false colors. I'm Curly Keene, bandit, an' all around desperado. Adios."

Brazos picked up his bag and made for the platform. As the train slowed to a halt he espied Bilyen foremost of the waiting bystanders. Before Brazos stepped down he swept the platform with searching gaze. Bilyen beckoned for him to come off.

"Howdy, Hank," drawled Brazos. "Kinda like old times to see yu packin' thet gun."

"Wal, you dressed-up son of a gun," ejaculated Hank, delighted. "Brazos, you shore look fine."

"How about things heah?"

"Not so good. But no hurry tellin'. I hope you had better luck than me."

"Hank, I shore learned a heap. But what good it'd do I cain't say. Come with me. I've got somethin' to tell Neece."

Brazos had no more to say until he and Hank met Neece at the cabin. It pleased Brazos to see that Neece was a changed man. He had pulled out of hopelessness. He had gained.

"Wal, Neece, I've news thet I shore hope yu'll find somethin' in," began Brazos. "My job at Kansas City, yu know, was to get track of the cattle people Surface ships to. I couldn't find oot. This may have been regular an' then again it may have been queer. Thet fact alone is queer. Their interest is in buyin' an' sellin' beef an' *not* in where it comes from. A big per cent of cattle herds shipped there is shore

rustled. An' nobody's tellin'.

"But I spent three days loafin' aboot the stockyards, an' I found oot from the yardmen aboot two big trainloads of longhorns thet was shipped in early spring. Longhorns an' mixed brands, from New Mexico. One trainload went into the stockyards an' was drove oot of there in small bunches. The other trainload went east. Yu cain't track unbranded cattle any more'n yu can cattle wearin' brands yu don't know. Shore them big trains carried yore herd. An' thet herd just faded.

"Wal, on thè way back I stopped over at Abilene. I was plumb nervous aboot it as aboot seven years ago I shot up thet burg. But shucks, everybody I ever knew was long daid. Funny how short-lived we Westerners air! Abilene has growed some an' it was still pretty hot. I mixed with cowboys, cattlemen, gamblers, an' town folks. Naturally, yu know yu never get anywhere askin' one Westerner aboot another. But I finally met a cowboy who once rode for Surface. He was not my kind an' he was mum as an oyster.

"Then I met a cattleman who spit fire when I asked aboot Surface. What I got oot of him might have pertained to any rancher. It 'peared this cattleman was kin to one who had been a pardner of Surface. Heah, I have the names. Stokes, the pardner was. Wal, Stokes an' Surface operated big in cattle. Surface bought an' Stokes sold. One day they quarreled an' Surface shot Stokes. Nobody saw the fight. Surface claimed Stokes drew first. Some people said the trouble was over money, an' some said Stokes had been heahed to question Surface aboot where he got his cattle. Anyway, Surface left Abilene. Thet was over a year ago. An' thet's aboot all."

"I reckon it's significant," declared Neece soberly.

"My idee is it strengthens our case," added Bilyen.

"Wal, I agree," said Brazos. "But what we air convinced of might not be worth a whoop in court. Surface has money an' influence. He'd beat us. An' we don't want any court decision against us. This deal will never go before a Denver court."

"You are daid right, Brazos," returned Bilyen.

"Yes, an' what I want is to get Surface daid to rights. Let me get thet in my own way. All the same I won't overlook the littlest hunch yu can give me. Anythin' could be a hunch."

"Lura Surface has left Twin Sombreros, so I heah," put in Hank. "She's stayin' with a friend, Delia Ross. An' lettin' thet gambler Howard run around with her."

"Yu don't say? Wal!"

"Brazos, did Hank tell you Henderson called on me?" queried Neece. "Well, he did. An' though he didn't mention Surface I took it as an expression of regret an' sympathy. Henderson is head of the bank that wouldn't lend me the money to save my ranch."

"Ahuh. Wal, thet is a hunch. Rustle my hawss, Hank. I'm ridin' to town."

Henderson received Brazos with a veiled surprise not unmixed with interest.

"I called to ask a couple of questions, Mr. Henderson, an' maybe one is in the nature of a favor," said Brazos frankly.

"Well, shoot, cowboy," replied the banker with an encouraging smile.

"Do yu know Jack Sain?"

"By sight only."

"Could yu give him a job ridin'?

From all I heahed since I came back yu need some riders. I'll stand for Jack."

"Very well. That is recommendation enough. Send him in."

"Thet's fine of yu, Mr. Henderson. Jack's down in the mouth, he's had such bad luck. He took the Neeces' trouble to heart. My other question is kinda personal an' I hope yu excuse it."

"What is it, Keene?"

"Air yu for or against Raine Surface?" asked Brazos deliberately.

"Is that any business of yours?"

"Not onless yu make it mine. But I'm against him. I'm on Abe Neece's side in this deal."

"Keene! So that is what Inskip meant?"

"Mr. Henderson, yu know me an' I make bold enough to think yu have confidence in me. If Cap Britt was heah in yore place he'd put me on this job."

"What job?"

"Why, yu're a Westerner, Mr. Henderson."

"Yes. And you're a clever cowboy, Keene— Did you know that Raine Surface killed a cattleman named Stokes for insinuating things?"

"Shore, I heahed thet."

"Keene, I won't say anything. But you can make your own conclusions."

"Will yu respect my confidence?"

"Absolutely."

"Wal, I reckon Raine Surface is another Sewall McCoy."

"Aha! That was behind your little address to the Cattlemen's Association some weeks ago? Inskip told me that very thing."

"Yes, it was an' is."

"Ticklish business, even for a Brazos Keene. Surface has many interests, riders galore, and according to range gossip a tough outfit somewhere up in the hills."

"All powerful interestin' to me, Mr. Henderson. If Surface didn't have them, he wouldn't class with Sewall McCoy. At thet I reckon McCoy had what Surface doesn't show to me. An' thet's brains. McCoy lasted for years in New Mexico. An' if it hadn't been for my suspicion aboot a cowboy rider in my ootfit, why McCoy might be playin' a high hand yet. But Surface won't last the month oot. He just doesn't savvy us."

"Us? And who are us?" queried Henderson tersely.

"Wal, Kiskadden an' Inskip an' Neece an' Bilyen an' me—an' *yu*, Mr. Henderson," drawled Brazos. "I'm obliged to yu for seein' me an' more especial for yore bolsterin' up of my hunch aboot Surface."

"See here, Keene, I didn't say—I didn't intimate—" stammered the banker-cattleman, much perturbed.

"All I needed was to talk to yu a little. I know what yu think. But yu didn't tell me an' yu can rest safe in thet assurance. Keep oot of Surface's way. He might try to bore yu to strengthen his stand."

Brazos strode out of the bank, glad to be in the open air, where he wanted to whoop and swear. But all he did do was to stand with apparent carelessness watching the passersby. Presently he turned the corner, down the side street and went around to Mexican Joe's. From the little window of his room upstairs he bent a keen and penetrating eye upon the men on the street.

Wal, I've got the cairds an' I can shore play them, soliloquized Brazos, as broodingly he watched the passers-

by and grew dark in the mood that held him aloof. *All I gotta do is lay for some of these hombres who're oot to cash me in. An' Bodkin is one of them. An' thet trio of hombres includin' the cowgirl with the little feet. An' maybe some others I gotta savvy. An' by Gawd, I'll bore some of them—an' cripple one who'll squeal. Failin' all thet I'll corner Surface himself—make him crawl or kill him!*

That night after supper Brazos began his stalk, as stealthily as if he were deer hunting, though with the wary intensity which accompanied the blood pursuit of man.

He kept to the shadows close to the sides of the buildings and he proceeded slowly. He was seen, but never by any pedestrian or lounger whom he had not seen first. One of Brazos's uncanny faculties—that which had always been a part of any gunman who survived long—was to sense in any person the mood which now gripped him.

Wherever possible, Brazos had a long look into a saloon before he entered. When he went in, it was with sudden stride, to stand facing the whole assembly, with a keen and menacing front. On these occasions there were indeed few occupants whom he did not see. And always, after a few moments, when the significance of his stand had permeated to the farthest corner, he would back out.

This bold maneuver had its telling effect. It made the crowd aware Brazos Keene was on the rampage, all the more dangerous because he was sober. It told his enemies, if any were present, that it was not possible to shoot him in the back, that a false move on the part of any man would precipitate a flashing gunplay, that he was ready for an even break.

Brazos left that impression behind him in all the saloons and gambling-dens of Las Animas. He left more—an intense curiosity as to whom he was so boldly seeking. Those who had seen him had not the least idea that Brazos himself did not know. He guessed they would whisper the names of Bodkin, Barsh, possibly Surface, though hardly the last named, for the rancher did not frequent these disreputable halls. Lastly, the act itself affected Brazos deeply, almost equivalently to the stimulus of hard liquor, from which fire and violence of spirit he would not recover until this bloody business had run its course.

Contrary to Brazos's earlier consideration of what he thought he had better do, he presented himself at the door of the Neeces' apartment over the restaurant and knocked solidly. The door opened quickly, to disclose one of the twins in a dressing-gown, most bewitching in the dim lamplight.

"Sorry—but I gotta see June," announced Brazos with a deep breath.

"Come in. I've been waiting. I knew you'd come. Janis and Auntie have gone to bed," she replied, in a low voice a little hurried.

Brazos strode in with his clinking tread and dropped his sombrero on the floor. Almost, the sweetness of June's presence, the intimacy she granted, burned away that dark mood. He flinched at a thought of his brazenness—at his stubborn need to end misunderstanding. But a second thought reassured Brazos. It was only fair to him that she should hear his honest intentions. He might not be able to come back again.

June stood before him, turning up the lamp ever so little. She looked at him with dark wide eyes.

"Had I not better run to my room and slip on a dress? I'm quite—quite—"

"Quite distractin'—an' thet's what I need," he interrupted her gloomily.

"Brazos!" She came close to catch the lapels of his coat and look up anxiously. "What has happened? I never saw you look like this."

"Nothin' happened yet, June. But it's gonna happen—an' pronto. There air men in town—I don't know how many—come to kill me. An' I just been goin' the rounds to let them see I won't be so easy to kill."

Flattered by her anxiety, Brazos had reacted to the desire to carry it still farther. Though his statement was not in the least exaggerated, it was yet one he would not have made except under the stimulus of those troubled eyes.

"Oh, mercy! I feared—this," whispered June unsteadily, and leaned shaking against him.

"June, I reckoned yu'd better heah it from me," he said earnestly. "'Cause no matter if I am Brazos Keene—somethin' might happen. But I've been in a heap tighter place—to come oot safe. An' so it'll be this time."

"And it's all because you want to help us," she said eloquently.

"Never mind thet," he rejoined hastily. "June, it's shore hard to say the rest. My chest's cavin' in. Yu remember the night I left for Kansas City—how I was mad enough to take them—them two kisses yu was mad enough to say yu owed me?"

"I'll never forget, Brazos!"

"Wal, I was so scairt thet I ran off without declarin' myself. An' it's kinda haunted me since. June, I cain't have yu misunderstandin' me. It wasn't thet I was askin' anythin' of yu then. I just couldn't go without them kisses. An' the reason is yu—I—I— Aw! I love yu turrible, June. Thet's all. An' if I come oot of this mess alive I'll shore ask yu to marry me— Somethin' I'd better ask now—'cause when yu go home to live at Twin Sombreros an' be an heiress—why I just couldn't have the nerve."

She lifted her face, flushed and radiant. "Brazos," she whispered shyly, "I've loved you from the very first minute you looked at me."

"Aw, June—thet cain't be so!" he implored, and took her into his arms.

"It is so," she whispered, hiding her face on his shoulder. "It has nearly—driven me crazy. I was afraid—I thought you—you loved Janis best."

"Good Lord!" breathed Brazos over her clustering hair. But the nearness of her, the surrender of her soft palpitating person to him, the maddening fact that her white arms were slipping round his neck—these drove away the appalling thought of Janis.

"Brazos—did you ask me—anything?" she murmured.

"I said I would—if—when I come oot of this mess alive."

"Better ask me—now."

He was overcome and happier than he had ever hoped to be in his life.

"Darlin' June. I'm turrible unworthy of yu. But I love yu. An' I ask yu to—to be my wife."

"You have my promise," she said simply, and lifted her face from his shoulder, and then blushing scarlet—her lips to his.

"There! Ah, no more! Brazos!" she whispered, and slipped shyly from his arms, to close the opened dressing-gown around her neck. "Go now, Brazos. It's late. And here I am—forgetting my modesty! But you've made me happy. I'm not afraid *now*, Brazos. Adios, my cowboy!"

Chapter Seven

Brazos Gets an Earful

NEXT morning Brazos began patrolling Las Animas. It was Saturday, and the influx of cowboys and other ranch folk had noticeably begun. Brazos stalked by the Twin Sombreros restaurant looking out of the corner of his eye. Across the railroad tracks the station platform showed the usual crowd and bustle incident to the arrival of a train.

Inside the station Brazos encountered Lura Surface just turning away from the ticket window. She was dressed for a journey and her appearance was striking. She carried a satchel and evidently the larger bag at her feet belonged to her.

"Mawnin', Lura Surface. Air yu runnin' away on me?" drawled Brazos, doffing his sombrero.

"Brazos Keene!" she exclaimed. Then she gave him a glance from superb green eyes that was not particularly flattering. "Yes, I *am* running away, and for good–if it's anything to you."

"Yu don't say. Aw, I'm sorry. I been wantin' to see yu powerful bad."

"Yes, you have," she rejoined with scorn.

"Honest Injun, Lura."

"Why didn't you then? I wrote you. I wanted to ask you to–to help me. I went to the place where we met before. But you didn't come. And you never wrote."

"Lura, thet's too bad. I'm sorry. I never got yore letter. Fact is I haven't been to the post office. Don't never want to get another letter! An' I've been away for weeks."

"I heard you had–only yesterday. Too late to save my hard feelings toward you."

"Lura, yu make me feel bad. What'd I do to hurt yu?"

"The nerve of you! To ask that."

"Wal, I'm askin'," he returned, with his frank smile. As a matter of fact Brazos remembered very well, and also the regret he had felt at the time.

"It's too late, Brazos," she said, a little bitterly. "I'm going to Denver to marry Hal Howard."

"Aw! yu don't say? Wal, I'm shore congratulatin' thet hombre."

"But you don't congratulate me?" she flashed.

"Hardly. I just cain't see yu throwin' yoreself away on a cairdsharp. Why, Lura, yu got all the girls oot heah skinned to a frazzle."

"If you thought so–so much of me why did you–" she asked, softening under his warm praise, and faltering to a close. Her hard green eyes misted over. Then she went on, "Was it because you'd heard things about my love affairs?"

"No, it shore wasn't," he replied bluntly, realizing that he had met her at a singularly opportune moment.

"I was a flirt. But I would have told *you*– I had to have a man, Brazos. If you don't want me to hate you forever, tell me why–why you started so sweetly–and left me flat?"

"Lura, I reckon I don't know how sweet I started, but I shore know I fell flat," said Brazos earnestly. It was only a half truth, but it did not lack sincerity. "An' if I'd gone on meetin' yu, I'd fall'n so turrible in love with yu thet I'd half died. But I swear, Lura, it wasn't thet which made me back oot."

"Brazos! You were afraid of Dad?" she whispered.

"No. Not thet. Lura, I'm not afraid of any man. But it was because *he* was *yore* father."

She met his piercing gaze with understanding, and a visible shudder.

"I can forgive you now, Brazos. And I can return your confidence. Dad wanted you hanged. And you didn't want me to break my heart over a cowboy who knew why Dad wanted him out of the way. Howard figured it all out. He had that hold on father—so we played it for all it was worth—while I was still an heiress."

The train whistled for the stop. Lura designated her bag, which Brazos took up. They went out on the platform, where Brazos reverted to the man who was not going to be surprised by an enemy. The engine rumbled past; the train halted with squeak and jar; and there followed the bustle incident to its arrival. Brazos helped Lura on, found a seat for her, and depositing her bag he held out his hand, finding speech difficult.

"Good-by an' good luck," he said. "Yu're game, Lura. I'm gonna risk a word of advice. Stop Howard's caird playin'."

"He will not need to gamble," she flashed with a smile. "One last word, Brazos Keene. Lean closer." She put her cool lips to his ear, in what certainly was a caress as well as an act of secrecy. "For my sake, spare Dad the rope!"

Brazos could find no answer. He clasped her hand hard, bent over it and then let go to stand erect. The train was moving. One last glance he took at her eyes, brimming with tears, and dark with pain. Then he wheeled to run back to the platform, and jump off. He stood till the train passed by, and then, absorbed in thought, wended a pondering watchful way down the street.

At the corner where the bank stood an idea struck him. He went in to see Henderson. Without any greeting or other preliminary Brazos flung a query at the keen-eyed banker.

"Did this heah bank get held up yesterday or maybe day before?"

"By a bandit?" replied Henderson, laughing despite his surprise.

"I reckon one man might think thet. A bandit with green eyes an' red hair."

"Keene, you're a wizard. You beat me all hollow."

"Wal, come oot with it then. Didn't Raine Surface draw a big sum of money?"

"All he had in cash."

"How much was thet?"

"Close to forty thousand dollars."

"Doggone! An' wasn't Howard with him?"

"Yes. Surface claimed it was a gambling debt. He didn't strike me as good a loser as usual."

"Gamblin' debt yore eye!" retorted Brazos scornfully. "Henderson, thet was the price of Howard's silence. The gambler sold oot cheap. But still he got the girl."

"Lura!"

"Who else?"

"Good heavens!" ejaculated the banker, intensely astonished. "I begin to see light."

"Yu been wearin' blinders long enough, Henderson. Keep this under yore hat for the present."

"Wait, Keene," said the other, as Brazos turned to go. "That little matter of putting Bodkin in as sheriff has come up. What'll I do about it?"

"Air yu still in Surface's Cattle As-

sociation, Henderson?"

"I resigned."

"Wal, if I was yu, Mr. Henderson, I'd say pretty pert thet I was for savin' the town Bodkin's burial expenses by not electin' him sheriff."

"That's certainly pert. I'll do it, Brazos. But let me give you a hunch. They'll make Bodkin sheriff."

"Shore they will—if he's crazy enough to accept it. I guess I better throw a scare into him."

Brazos left the bank to stalk down the street. The business of this important day was in full swing. All available space along the sidewalks was occupied by wagons, buckboards, and saddle horses. It was dusty and hot. Shirt-sleeved Westerners of every class moved along the walks or stood at doors or corners. It was noticeable to Brazos that as he approached, some of them froze and most of them attempted to conceal restraint. None of them met his glance. But when he passed they turned to watch him.

Passing the open door of the largest merchandise store Las Animas could boast of, Brazos had a glimpse of Bodkin holding forth to a group of men, some of them dusty yellow-booted visitors from the range. Brazos passed on and halted. What could he make out of an encounter with Bodkin? The man would not draw. But he could be made a target for speech that would sweep over town like fire in prairie grass.

Brazos turned back to enter the store. He assumed a swinging forward crouch and the sullen mien of a cowboy who had been tilting the bottle. The little group spread from a circle to a line, leaving Bodkin in the center, and apart. The action was like clockwork.

Bodkin showed no marked effect at sight of Brazos. As the cowboy had let him off before, he would again. This time, however, the ex-deputy packed a gun at his hip.

"Bodkin, I been lookin' all over this heah town for yu," declared Brazos in a surly voice.

"Keene, I haven't been hidin'," complained Bodkin.

"Wal, yu're damn hard to find, an' yu shore got thet Barsh hombre hid somewhere."

"He's out of town."

"When's he comin' back?"

"I don't know. Probably soon."

"Can yu get word to him?"

"I could if I wanted to."

"Ahuh. Wal, yu better want to. Yu tell yore ropin' hombre thet he'd be wise to stay away from heah or else do some tall figgerin' how he's gonna keep me from borin' him."

"Keene, Barsh wouldn't dare meet you in an even break. He's only a boy. He never shot at a man. An' you wouldn't shoot him in cold blood."

"Hell I wouldn't! Hasn't there been a lot of shootin' in cold blood goin' on aboot heah? I'm sore, Bodkin. I'm spittin' fire."

"So I see. That's your game. It's none of my business. Everybody knows you're rarin' to fight, but you don't shoot men who're tryin' to keep out of your way."

"What's to keep me from shootin' Barsh's laig off?" demanded Brazos, swaggering a little. He had his sombrero pulled down over his eyes so that they were in shadow.

"Your bein' Brazos Keene, I reckon."

"An' what's to keep me from shootin' *yore* laig off?"

"I'm not worryin' none," returned Bodkin, but the fading of his healthy

tan attested to another state of mind. The interview had begun to be painful to him. He seemed to catch a point in it.

"Ahuh. I reckon yu got me figgered good. Wal, then, yu're so damn smart what's to keep me from shootin' Raine Surface's laig off?"

Bodkin's start and expression were peculiar, and he did not reply. All the other men stood spellbound. The business of the big store ceased, clerks and customers standing amazed in their tracks.

"Answer thet, Bodkin. Talk, damn yu! Wasn't yu loud-mouthed when I dropped in on yu?" shouted Brazos in a loud rasping voice that halted pedestrians outside. "What's to keep me from shootin' Raine Surface's laig off?"

"Nothin', Keene—nothin'," ejaculated the other, harassed and impotent. He knew what was coming and he could not ward it off. Only a gun could do that! "But you couldn't do it—any more than to Barsh. Mr. Surface is out of your reach. He's a big man on this range. You're loco, Keene. You're drunk."

"Not so drunk as yu reckon, Bodkin. An' yu're defendin' Surface from a likker-soakin', fire-spittin', gun-throwin' cowboy?"

"I'm tryin' to talk sense. You might as well bust in on Henderson in the bank, or Mr. Jones here at his desk—as Raine Surface. Why, it's outlandish! Mr. Surface is a generous, big-hearted gentleman, a power in this town, a fine citizen who has the best interests of the community—"

"Haw! Haw!" interrupted Brazos in harsh mockery, "Bodkin, yu must be a fool as wal as the other things yu air. I reckon next yu'll say Surface never did anythin' against *me*."

"Sure he—never did," panted Bodkin loyally, beginning to sweat. He was caught in a trap of his own setting.

"The hell's fire he didn't! How aboot ridin' after yu thet day an' orderin'—*I say orderin'*—yu to hang me right then an' there?"

"He didn't order me. I was actin' under orders from Kiskadden."

"Yu lyin' tool of thet two-faced cattleman!" Brazos fairly hurled the epithet. "An' next yu'll be sayin' thet Surface didn't beat Abe Neece oot of Twin Sombreros Ranch—he didn't steal the herd of Texas longhorns thet Neece had comin' north. Aw, no—not atall! He didn't have his tools buy off or kill Neece's ootfit of riders an' drive thet herd west along the Cimarron, over the Dry Trail, across New Mexico to the railroad? Aw, no—not atall! Surface didn't have his tools—one of which *you* air, damn yore yellow skin! He didn't have them hold Neece up thet night late an' rob him of the money Neece was takin' to the bank next mawnin'. Aw, hell no! not atall! An' yore big-hearted respectable fine boss didn't have nothin' to do with Allen Neece's murder?"

"My Gawd—no!" gasped Bodkin huskily. "Keene—all I can say is—you're drunk—or crazy."

"Yu're the crazy one, Bodkin," rasped Brazos, in a voice no drunken man could have used. "An' yore boss, Surface, is wuss than crazy. He's new heah. An' yu're not so damn old. Why, man, this corner of Colorado is close to New Mexico. There air Texans on this range. Yu're lookin' at one now."

"Brazos Keene—Texan or no—you'll be run out of Las Animas," blustered Bodkin haggardly, fighting for wit and

courage to defend himself.

"An' who's goin' to do thet little job?" queried Brazos scornfully.

"Surface will. The Cattlemen's Association. The business men of this town. They can't stand for such ravin'—"

"Cheese it, Bodkin," cut in Brazos piercingly. "Yu heahed me. An' yore little audience heahed me. Just what yu air ootside of a monumental liar I haven't figgered yet. But yu're crooked. Yu heah thet? Yu're crooked. An' if yore crooked boss puts yu in as sheriff of Las Animas I'll kill yu!"

Brazos ended that ringing denunciation in a silence which could be felt. Bodkin's terrified visage satisfied Brazos that he had driven his point home. The spectators equally satisfied Brazos that his incredible affront would fly swiftly as the wind on a thousand tongues to every corner of the range. His New Mexico friends, Holly Ripple, Renn Frayne, and Cap Britt would hear it before the week was out. Raine Surface would be a marked if not a ruined man.

One of the spectators outside the store was Kiskadden.

"Howdy, Texas. Where'n hell have yu been for so long? Did yu heah our little session in there?"

"Heah yu! Say, cowboy, yu could have been heahed over in the next county. Thet was good, even for Brazos Keene. I reckon they got yu desperate."

"Riled, anyway. What'll they do, Kiskadden?"

"I'll be damned if I can reckon thet. Import some ootfit to get rid of yu, I reckon."

"I've been lookin' for the two men an' a girl who killed Allen Neece. Cain't find a trace of them."

"Wal, yu will now. Surface will have to kill yu to save his name. It shore was a clever trick, Brazos. Let's drop in somewhere an' talk."

For three days Brazos watched Bodkin unobtrusively. Brazos found nothing tedious in hiding in every conceivable kind of place to get track of Bodkin's movements. The ex-deputy went about with a bold front, but it was evident to Brazos that the man was feeling extreme perturbation. He never went near Twin Sombreros Ranch. Bodkin was waiting for the terrible news to reach Surface's ears.

On the third night Brazos frightened the proprietor of the hotel where Bodkin stayed into giving him the room next to Bodkin's. Brazos made sure Bodkin was out, then carefully cut a hole through the partition in a corner where it would not soon be discovered. This done, Brazos sat down to wait. Some time Bodkin would be cornered in that room by Surface, or would confer with one or more of the rancher's men. Brazos meant to hide there, going out only after nightfall, until the developments he expected reached their climax.

But as Brazos's luck would always have it, his marvelous patience did not need to be exercised. At midnight, just after the eastbound train had arrived, Bodkin entered his room with two men. Brazos, moving about in his stocking feet, glued his ear to the little hole in the corner.

"Talk low, fellers," Bodkin said, "I'm scared even of the walls in this town. Keene hasn't been seen for three days."

"Sure as God made little apples he's trailin' you," whispered one of them.

"I feel it, Brad. Set down. Hyar's likker an' cigars. I sure got a lot on my

chest thet I got to get rid of."

Brazos's frame leaped as if galvanized by a vital current at the name Brad. That night on the road, had he mistaken the name Bard for Brad? He was going to find out, and he stiffened with eagerness. He heard the gurgle of liquor out of a bottle and the striking of matches.

"Panhandle Ruckfall showed yellow clear to his gizzard," spoke up another voice, thin and low, somehow sibilant. "He turned the job down. I raised the ante to two thousand dollars. Ruckfall gave me the laugh. 'A hell of a lot of fun I'd get out of ten thousand after meeting Brazos Keene!' is what he said. He had too much sense to tackle such a deal. He might have killed Keene, but it's an even bet that Keene would kill him.

"There was not another gunman in Dodge or Abilene who would have any chance against Keene. I advised against that—and there we are. If we tried Billy the Kid he'd be liable to bore us."

"We're stuck," whispered Bodkin thickly. "I've been keepin' out of the boss's way. But he corraled me today. Gawd Almighty! I reckoned he was goin' to shoot me."

"You're wrong, Bodkin," rejoined the one with the curt voice. "It's he who's stuck. Serves him right. He's gone too far. That Neece deal was too raw. I *told* him. Now, if Bard and his girl fail—"

An eloquent silence gave Brazos time to grasp this new connection—so there was a Bard as well as a Brad!

"Did you fetch them?" queried Bodkin.

"Yes. And Orcutt with them. They went to Hailey's."

"Now what?" asked the third man.

"We'll lay low till it's over, Brad."

"Listen," whispered this member of the trio. "It'll be over pronto. Brazos Keene will see through thet dodge. Bard's black-eyed wench is a slick one. But I'll bet she fails hyar."

"She's our best bet," returned Bodkin hoarsely. "Keene is hot after women. The town is full of talk about him runnin' after Lura Surface an' the Neece twins. An' they're all *good* girls. Bess Syvertsen is *bad*—bad from her mother up. Add to thet, she's handsome as hell. Keene can't resist such a combination."

"The hell's fire he can't," retorted Brad. "You don't savvy that hombre. Now here's what I think of your deal. I'm not beholdin' to any of you. An' tomorrow I'm lightin' out of this town an' I'm ridin' far. If you've got an ounce of sense you'll do the same."

"Brad, I can't pull up stakes hyar. I'm goin' to be sheriff of this county."

"You're goin' to be a stiff," snorted Brad.

"Not so loud," put in the third man with his cool voice. "Bodkin, I'm afraid Brad has it figured. I'd say if we had plenty of time we'd have a sure thing with Bess Syvertsen on the job. She's the most fascinating girl I ever met. But the hell of it is, can we take time? It's got to be done right now."

"We'll have to give her time."

"Every hour adds to the doubt and suspicion already working."

"Even with Brazos Keene dead—which is sure a far-fetched conclusion, gentlemen—this town is going to think on. Henderson, Kiskadden, Inskip, Moore, Hadley, Stevens—all these men are getting their heads together. They are going to buck the Cattlemen's Association. They'll split it wide open. Most of them are honest cattlemen,

you know. They've just been fooled. Cattlemen are the easiest of men to fool because they take a little irregularity for granted, even among themselves, and they don't want to think. But when it comes to being robbed by rustlers—they wake up.

"Look at the Lincoln County War—the Nebraska range feud, the Wyoming Jasper deal, or any of the famous examples, especially that Sewall McCoy-Russ Slaughter combine a few years ago over here in New Mexico. And Brazos Keene is the cowboy who ferreted that out, confronted those men with the fact of their guilt—and killed them both!"

Another pregnant little silence ensued. One of the men got up to move about and breathe hard. A second poured out a drink. That interview was wearing to a close. And Brazos grew tense and stiff with a fast approaching problem of what his next move should be.

"Fellers," said Brad, at length, "I'm pullin' up stakes. An' I don't mind tellin' you I'd take that bag of gold with me, if I could find it."

"Ha! Ha!" laughed Bodkin low and sarcastically. Brad was not the only one who had had that ingenious idea.

"Where did he put it?" queried the unknown man. "He must have banked such a large sum."

"Not much. He hid it," declared Bodkin.

"What was the motive in that?"

"He couldn't bank it. An' it's too soon yet after Neece's holdup. But it runs in my mind that he'll keep it close so he'll be well heeled when he slopes."

"Does Bard know where that money is?"

"No more than do I. It's always stuck in his craw—that bag of gold. He an' Orcutt held Neece up. An' once I heard Orcutt say, 'Why did we let that gold get out of our hands?'"

"Same reason that applies to all of us. The stronger will of a crookeder man! Well, he's run his race. It's not in the nature of things for all the men he has used to stand around now, waiting to be hanged or shot. How about you, Bod?"

"I'll stick around," replied Bodkin evasively.

"Every man for himself from now on, eh?"

"Let's drink to thet."

Brazos had only a moment more to decide his course of action. All the tiger in him leaped at the thought of confronting these conspirators before they left that room. He had heard the facts. But the strong heady impulse to kill could not hold against his intelligence, his judgment, his genius for thinking the right thing at the right moment. There would be little to gain in a fight and very much to risk. Wherefore Brazos relaxed from that passionate blood lust. This Brad, and the unnamed man, would go their separate ways, and probably never cross Brazos's trail again. But Bodkin, coward though he was, had some powerful motive for remaining in Las Animas.

Brazos heard the two men depart, treading softly, and he heard Bodkin curse his relief and satisfaction. Something had ended and it was more than that interview.

Chapter Eight

"Black-Eyed Wench."

ON EVERY Sunday the event of the day was the arrival and departure of the afternoon train. It was about as much of a social gathering as Las Animas saw except at dances and school entertainments. There was no church. The crowd appeared dressed in their best.

Brazos occupied his old stand against the wall of the station building. His presence, for those who noticed him, served to inhibit somewhat the leisurely pleasure of the hour.

Bess Syvertsen was there with some country folk about whom Brazos was almost as curious as he was about her. He needed only one look to convince himself that none of the four men could be Bard Syvertsen or Orcutt. The fifth was a woman of rather bold and flashy appearance. Brazos studied them with interest.

He was surprised at this incident. He had not expected the stellar member of Surface's crooked trio to show any interest in people of the community. He had expected them to be strangers. Moreover Bess Syvertsen should be looking for him, which she assuredly did not happen to be doing. The train arrived, and the woman, accompanied by the two best-dressed of the men, boarded it. Bess, with the other two, turned away to stroll along the station platform, following the crowd upstreet. Brazos, from under his sombrero brim, looked that trio over as if his eyes were magnifying glasses. The two men were hangers-about-town; he had seen them somewhere.

Brazos paid little attention to Bess Syvertsen's cowgirl garb, except to note that she packed a gun somewhat too heavy for her slim build. He looked at her face.

From a distance it appeared oval, of pale olive hue, lighted by piercing dark eyes. As she came nearer he had opportunity to observe more closely. A small face, framed in dark hair which showed well under the small black sombrero, it would have been strikingly pretty but for a hard, ruthless, hawklike cast that Brazos did not miss. He would have been most thoughtful about it but for the conviction, as she passed, that without doubt she knew him and had all the while been aware of his presence.

Monday brought back the bustle and rising dust and moving color to the cattle town. Brazos felt that this day he would meet Bess Syvertsen and he was on edge for the event. Wherefore he was all primed and set for the momentous meeting when it came about at the post office.

Bess had dropped out of the sky, apparently, to follow him up to the window where Brazos was asking for mail. She pressed close to Brazos and asked the clerk for a stamp. What a hot gush ran along Brazos's veins at the sound of that young high-pitched voice! He recognized it, except for the sweet quality, which had taken the place of the nervous shrill note he remembered. For the stamp she tendered a hundred-dollar bill, which the clerk pushed back with a laugh.

"What will I do?" she complained.

"I'll trust you. Go to the bank and get change."

Brazos promptly produced some coins. "Heah, lady, I'll oblige yu," he

drawled, handing her the money.

"Oh, thank you," she replied, suddenly becoming aware of his presence. She took the two cents and paid for her stamp, but she had no letter upon which to put it. Then she turned to Brazos, who had dropped back a few steps.

"Cowboy, how is it I haven't seen *you?*" she asked merrily.

Brazos took off his sombrero and stood uncovered before her, with his habitual cool courtesy in the presence of the opposite sex.

"Wal, I was just thinkin' the same aboot *yu*," he drawled with his slow smile.

"I am Bess Syvertsen," she said deliberately.

Brazos made her a gallant bow. "I shore am happy to meet yu," he replied, but he did not mention his name.

While these remarks were exchanged she led Brazos aside from the doorway to the window. They stood there then, looking at each other. She was as sincere as a woman could be. Brazos's interest, a cowboy's sudden flare-up at meeting a new girl, was only a smiling dissimulation. Surprise seemed to be her dominant feeling of the moment, behind which she betrayed a profoundly deep interest. Brazos thought ironically that a girl who meant to murder a man in cold blood would be likely to have some interest in him.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Aw, I hate to tell yu."

"You needn't be afraid," she said with a smile that changed the flinty beauty of her face. "I can stand a shock."

"Wal, then, doggone it—I'm thet poor hombre, Brazos Keene."

"No!" she exclaimed. Despite her deceit she betrayed sincerity as well. "Not that hard-riding, hard-drinking, hard-shooting cowboy?"

"I shore am ashamed to confess it, lady."

"I just can't believe you're Brazos Keene," she declared seriously, and she flashed those glittering black eyes over Brazos's silver spurs and high boots, his dark garb against which the heavy black gun belt and gun did not show conspicuously, his vest and scarf, to his face where it fixed with as compelling a scrutiny as Brazos cared to meet.

"You forget yore West, my girl," he drawled. "Range talk blames me for a lot thet I'm innocent of."

"Range talk is always true, Brazos Keene."

"Wal, I'm gonna return yore compliment, so far as lookin' yu over is concerned," said Brazos with his disarming smile, and proceeded to treat her to an examination as keen as hers had been.

The spurs she wore had been used to ride with and not for ornament, though they were of finest Spanish design. Her elegant custom-made boots adorned the smallest and most shapely feet Brazos had ever seen. Her slender legs and rounded hips, the grace of which the trousers accentuated rather than hid, were excuse enough to hold the gaze of a woman-mad cowboy such as he was said to be.

She wore a gray blouse and a red scarf and a dark leather vest with pearl buttons. It hung open. Brazos noted that it could not have been buttoned over her swelling breasts. And as he permitted his scrutiny to end on her face, he saw it to be beautiful on the moment, warm and radiant, almost sweet with the light of woman's pleas-

ed vanity. And smiling into her eyes, Brazos could no more believe that she was a hardened frontier dance-hall girl, a lure used to entice men, than she could believe he was the frontier's wildest and bloodiest cowboy.

"Well, how do you like me?" she queried archly. "You took long enough about it. I felt as if you were undressing me."

"Like! Why, I think yu're just wonderful. An' I don't care who yu air, where yu come from, or who yu're with."

"You might be taking a risk. My father has no use for cowboys."

"Is he heah?"

"Yes. Bard Syvertsen. He's a cattle buyer. We travel all over from Kansas City to Denver. Father has a deal on with Surface and Miller."

"Wal, it's just too bad. Always my luck! I ride the ranges an' I meet girls. Reckon I'm hard to please. My mother taught me to respect her sex. I don't care for town hussies or camp trulls. I cain't stand these nice goody-goody spoony little girls, neither. Lura Surface was one to make a cowboy ride high an' handsome. But she was a flirt. An' heah I meet yu!"

"Brazos, I might be a flirt—or worse," she said.

"Shore. I'm only confessin' how yu strike me. An' yu'll have to tell me if yu want to change thet."

"Brazos! The hell of it is I—I don't want to change it," she said, with emotion. "It's got me by the throat. Now doesn't that flatter your cowboy vanity?"

"I don't savvy yu, Bess. I never could savvy a girl who was deep. All the same I feel as if yu were fightin' somethin' yu didn't want me to know. Tell me or not, as yu like. But if I strike yu pretty pronto, yu know, an' bold—it's because I see no sense in holdin' back things. I've a bad reputation an' I'm liable to be shot any time. Life is too short for my kind not to live from day to day."

"Well, I savvy you, Brazos Keene, and I think—never mind what *I* think. Suppose I don't tell you another thing about myself?"

"Thet'll make no difference. It's what yu air to me thet'd count. Take it or leave it. No harm's been done. An' if there's a regret it'll be mine. I'll shore be glad I met yu an' had this little talk—an' I'll ride on always rememberin' what a turrible lot I missed."

"Meaning friendship—or more—with me—kisses and all that?"

"I reckon."

"Take you or leave you?" she mused darkly. "For a notorious gunman you certainly are a strange fellow. You put me in a hard place. I won't let you go. I'd rather you didn't think me as—as good as gold—such a wonderful girl. Yet it's so—so—"

"Wal, Bess, if yu're not sendin' me aboot my business let me dream on," interrupted Brazos. "Yu couldn't change yore looks nor thet somethin' like sweet fire thet I feel in yu."

She clung to his arm during the walk to Hailey's, where she released it.

"Brazos, I thought I was glad to meet you—at first. But I'm not so sure now."

"Aw, thet's not kind. Is it good-by, then?"

"Where will you meet me tomorrow?"

"Heah. Anywhere—any time."

"Anywhere?" she asked, with her unfathomable eyes piercing him. "How about out of town?"

"Wal, I reckon it'd better be heah,"

returned Brazos. And when he said that it seemed a passion wrenched her.

"Tomorrow then. Here at two o'clock. Adios."

Next day Bess Syvertsen was late. Brazos walked to and fro in front of the hotel. She came at length, betraying signs of anger and she was all the more handsome for that. She vouchsafed no explanation. But Brazos did not need one. They spent the afternoon together, walking, sitting in the station, standing in the post office.

Brazos made violent love to Bess and she drank it up thirstily. She begged off going to supper with him or seeing him that night. When she left him she was apparently again dominated by the attraction he had for her.

This state of affairs continued next day and on the following, with Bess betraying to Brazos's keen eye varying augmenting emotions.

Despite Brazos's knowledge and his ruthlessness, it was quite impossible not to be receptive to her fascination. No doubt her predicament accounted for some of this. She had not done one single thing, since their meeting at the post office, that Brazos could construe to be intent on her part to lure him to his death. That, of course, had been the original incentive; that was what her father, Bard Syvertsen, and his man Orcutt, were waiting for. No doubt when Bess faced them after another day with Brazos she had to lie and plead for more time.

On the fourth day of this strange relation Bess came an hour late. Her face was colorless and showed other signs of havoc. For once Brazos failed to read the expression of her piercing eyes. Behind her stalked two men, one tall, the other short. That they were without vests and gun belts Brazos's sharp eye recorded before he paid attention to their features. The little man had a visage that was a map of frontier crime. This should be Orcutt. The tall man then was Bard Syvertsen and he was a splendid specimen of Norwegian manhood, lofty of stature, fair-haired, with eyes like blue ice, and a handsome craggy face. He was all of forty years old.

"Brazos," said Bess hurriedly, as she advanced, "meet my father, Bard Syvertsen, and Hen Orcutt."

"Howdy, gentlemen," drawled Brazos in his cool voice, and he made no effort to be other than Brazos Keene. At the moment he knew he risked no peril from them, and they had confronted him significantly unarmed. What their idea was, Brazos could not conjecture. Perhaps it was an overwhelming curiosity to see the cowboy at close hand.

"Howdy, Keene. Glad to meet you," said Orcutt curtly.

Syvertsen returned Brazos's greeting in a voice Brazos would have recognized among a thousand voices. If Bard Syvertsen had been armed at the moment he would have been close to the death Brazos meant to mete out to him.

"My girl has been spending a good deal of time with you, cowboy," he said.

"Wal, I reckon I know thet, an' how lucky I am," replied Brazos.

"I object to it."

"Yeah—an' on what grounds, Mister Syvertsen?"

"No insult intended. But it's common talk about town—you're a trifler with women. I told Bess, and that she must stop your attentions. She said I could tell you myself."

"Ahuh. Wal, I'm sorry to say I cain't

take offense. But in this heah case I'm in daid earnest."

Both these allies of Bess Syvertsen evinced expectation of any other reply save this—evasiveness on Brazos's part or curt assurance that it was none of their business, or a cool denial. Orcutt blazed under his swarthy seamed skin and if Syvertsen's eyes did not glare with jealousy, Brazos was wrong. He loved the girl with a passion Brazos did not think paternal.

"Keene, I did not believe Bess," returned Syvertsen, as if forced. "That accounts for this intrusion. You'll excuse us."

They turned into the hotel and Brazos's keen ear caught a remnant of a curse Orcutt was bestowing upon the other. Brazos could not gauge the significance of this encounter.

"Bess, what'n hell was all thet aboot?" queried Brazos, turning to the girl in apparent bewilderment. She seemed to be in distress.

"Come. People are staring," she answered hurriedly, and drew him away.

The ensuing hours of the afternoon grew to be something of a nightmare to Brazos. They walked all over town and when too tired to walk more they sat down on whatever there was available.

If Bess Syvertsen had been a fascinating creature on former days, she was on this occasion vastly more. Only late in the day did Brazos gather that the climax had come—that Bess Syvertsen had been driven by her accomplices to end the farce—or that she was a woman being torn apart by love and an evil power too strong for her. After supper, which they ate at Mexican Joe's, she leaned her elbows on the table, her face on her hands, and gazed at Brazos with eyes that hid much and expressed more.

Brazos had no doubt that when she had left the hotel with him some hours previous she had bowed to Syvertsen's bidding. But all afternoon she had struggled against that. Brazos knew what she did not guess—that he had seen Syvertsen and Orcutt ride out a side street toward the open country where they expected Bess to make a rendezvous with Brazos. She was a tortured woman. Up to nightfall Brazos expected some importunity of hers—some subterfuge to entice him out of town. But it never materialized, and for that proof of womanliness on her part he swore he would spare her when the worst befell.

"Let's go," she said suddenly, her eyes alight with new impulse too soft to be crafty. They went out upon the street. It was the supper hour and the street was deserted. There was no one in the lobby of Hailey's hotel.

"Come!" And she drew him with steel hands and will as steely, up the stairs to the floor above. The lamp had not been lit and the corridor was shadowy. Brazos grew wary. Still he could not sense any relation to Syvertsen and Orcutt in Bess's tense mood and action. She unlocked a door and opened it.

"Wal, sayin' good night early, eh, honey?" he drawled. "It's been a hard day at thet. See yu tomorrow same time."

"Yes—but come in—now," she panted.

"Bess! Air yu loco—askin' me into yore bedroom?"

"Loco, indeed! Come—don't be a fool."

"I'm only human, Bess—an' I reckon I'd weaken if we was goin' to marry. But with all yore love talk I cain't see yu'd marry me."

"Brazos Keene! Would you marry

me?" she whispered passionately.

"My Gawd! What yu take me for? I told yu I was a Texan an' had respect for a woman I loved."

She threw her arms around his neck and clung to him, quivering, appearing to stifle speech as well as sobs upon his breast. It was as if a new emotion had consumed a lesser fire within her. The paroxysm ended in a passionate embrace, in sudden wild despairing kisses upon his cheek and lips. And she tore at his hair. "Go—go— before I—"

She broke off huskily and, releasing him, shut the door in his face.

Brazos's morning habit of whipping and rolling his guns—at rare intervals he packed two guns—had infinitely more meaning next morning than the perfunctory practice indulged in by all gunmen. His instinct told him the day had come—the meeting with the murderers of Allen Neece was not far away. His favorite gun made a shining wheel as he rolled it on his finger. And like magic it leaped at his bidding from the gun sheath.

He went down to breakfast with his right hand burning, with the thin skin on his thumb feeling almost raw. He was late for this meal, yet he lingered over it, brooding while he watched the street. When he saw Surface drive by in a buckboard he muttered, "Ah-huh. I reckon my hunch was aboot correct."

At length Brazos stalked out of Mexican Joe's, tense for the climax, choosing as always to let the moment demand its decision and action of him. He met Kiskadden and Inskip on the street.

"What's Surface doin' in town?" he queried bluntly.

"Meetin' of the Cattlemen's Association," replied Inskip. "Surface looked black as a thundercloud."

"Either of yu know Syvertsen an' Orcutt when yu see them?"

"I do," returned Kiskadden. "They ducked in Hall's to avoid meetin' me. Somethin' on their minds, Brazos."

"Will yu fellers do me a favor? Cross the street heah an' walk up thet side an' down on this side. Don't miss seein' anybody, but be particular to locate Syvertsen an' Orcutt. I'll wait heah. Take yore time. Those hombres shore won't be paradin' the street."

Brazos leaned against the wall and watched, while his friends reconnoitered. They seemed to take a long while. It wanted a quarter of an hour to his appointment with Bess Syvertsen. Hank Bilyen came along, apparently casually, but he stepped aside to join Brazos.

"Kiskadden told me you was heah. What's comin' off, Brazos?" he queried sharply.

"Go into Hall's an' line up at the bar so yu won't look nosey. But if Syvertsen an' Orcutt come oot be shore where they go."

Bilyen's uncertainty ceased. Without another word he walked on to enter Hall's saloon. Inskip was the first of the other two men to get back. He breathed hard; his gray eyes glinted.

"Brazos, I got a hunch there'll be hell a-poppin' pronto," he announced excitedly. "I seen Surface an' Bodkin in the doorway of the stairs leadin' up to the Odd Fellows. Surface was poundin' his fist in his hand, purple in the face. An' Bodkin was the color of sheepskin."

"Ahuh—aboot what time will thet cattlemen's meetin' be comin' off?"

"At two. But I reckon with Surface on the rampage it'll be late."

"Wal, yu an' Kiskadden make it yore business to be there so in case I run in yu won't miss nothin'."

"Brazos, are you goin' to brace Surface?"

"Don't stand heah. Go back across the street. Watch Hall's. An' when I go in yu come pronto."

Kiskadden reached Brazos at exactly two o'clock, the time of Brazos's appointment with Bess. The Texan showed no exterior fire, but Brazos felt him burn.

"Surface just went into Hailey's. He stopped Bess Syvertsen, who was comin' oot. I took time to light a smoke. I couldn't heah what Surface said to the girl, but I shore heahed her answer."

"An' what was thet?"

"'No, damn you, Surface! I won't! Get someone else to do yore dirty work!'"

"Ahuh. Short an' sweet. I had Bess figured. Anythin' more?"

"Surface hissed like a snake an' dragged the girl into the lobby. He's there now, ridin' her, I'll bet."

"Wal, he's ridin' for a fall. What else, Kis? I'm rustlin'."

"I peeped into Hall's. Yore men air still there."

"Drinkin'?"

"Not them. Watchin' oot the window."

"Wal, thet'll be aboot all. Yu stay heah. An' when I get into Hall's yu follow pronto."

"Brazos, let me go with yu?"

"Nope. The cairds air all oot, but they don't savvy them."

Brazos strode swiftly into the first store, traversed its length, hurried out into the alley, and ran to the side street. Here he slowed up, caught his breath, and went on to Hailey's hotel, which occupied the corner at its junction with the main street. Brazos stepped into the side entrance and on to the lobby.

Surface stood near the door of the hall, his tall form bent over the girl who was in the act of wrenching free from his clutch. His back was toward Brazos. Bess leaned against the wall as if for support. She looked a defiant, hounded creature, game to the finish.

"You can't scare me, Raine Surface," she said, low and hard. "I tell you I wouldn't be in your boots for all your money."

Brazos entered the lobby to confront them.

Chapter Nine

A Little Gunplay

"WAL, Bess, air yu meanin' daid man's boots?" queried Brazos, as he stepped in between them.

"Oh—Brazos!" gasped the girl.

Surface's visage changed instantly, markedly in color, monstrously in expression. The surprise was so complete that had Brazos sought more proof of the man's perfidy he would have seen it with the mask off. Unquestionably for an instant Surface thought his death was imminent.

"What yu raggin' my girl for?" asked Brazos, with a pretense of jealousy.

"Your—girl!" ejaculated Surface huskily, his jaw ceasing to wobble. "She's deceived you, Keene—same as all of us. She's Syvertsen's—"

"Daughter, yu mean?" interposed Brazos.

The rancher swerved. As his first

shocking fear subsided he began to recover his nerve. "Daughter—hell! She's no more Syvertsen's daughter than mine."

"So yu say? Wal, what is she, then?"

"What could she be, Keene? For a cowboy who's supposed to be so damned smart you're sure a fool."

"That'll do, Surface," cut in Bess, coming from behind Brazos. "I meant to tell him myself and leave Las Animas. Take care you don't drive me to tell him what *you* are!"

Brazos jerked as if stung. That was a liberation of his pent-up force. But the imperative need of pretense still persisted.

"What the hell!" he flashed. "Bess, I don't like this talk between yu an' him. But I trust yu. Surface, I always thought there was somethin' queer aboot yu."

Dealing Surface a powerful left-handed blow, Brazos knocked him flat. The rancher, scrambling up, stuttering maledictions, lifted a bloody, distorted visage. "You'll pay for this—outrage—you—"

Surface controlled a malignant rage. He had sense enough to see that he was impotent in the Western creed of man to man. But he could not control his expression, which flamed demoniacally upon Brazos and Bess, as he lunged away, colliding with the door in his hurry.

Brazos watched him a moment. The man was not big or strong in any sense. Brazos marveled that he had lasted as long as he had. To compare Raine Surface with Sewall McCoy, or any of the great cattle thieves, would have been to insult them.

"Come—Brazos," said Bess, low-voiced, and she touched his arm.

"Doggone it, Bess!" complained Brazos, going with her into the street. "I come pretty near gettin' sore."

"You well had reason," she replied composedly. "I'm sorry you saw me with Surface. You might believe *that* influenced me—to tell you—what I must."

"Ump-umm, Bess. But yu don't have to tell me nothin'."

"I must—if it's the last honest thing I ever do."

"All right, if yu put it thet way."

"Will you believe me, Brazos?" she entreated. "Believe me—when I've been such—a—a—cheat and liar?"

"Wal, Bess, yu air upset," he replied soothingly. But after a swift glance he did not want to look at her again. He had to see every man who approached them as they walked on down the street. "An' I can make allowance. If it'll do any good to tell me what's on yore mind go ahaid—an' I'll believe yu."

"Brazos Keene, you are the only man I ever honestly loved." she said earnestly.

"Wal, I'm glad to heah thet, but I don't savvy 'honestly'."

"I am proving it right now. If I hadn't loved you—you'd be a dead man right now."

"Yeah? Bess, thet kind of talk has a familiar ring. I've heahed it before."

"I was a cheat and a liar," she went on swiftly. "Whatever else I am you can guess. Surface told the truth. Bard Syvertsen is not my father. I never had any parents that I knew of. I was brought up in a home for—for illegitimates. Syvertsen did not ruin me—nor Orcutt. Don't hold *that* against them. They were hired to make away with you. I was to work on your well-known weakness for women—entice you to some secluded spot—or my room, where you'd be shot—supposedly by

an angry father and lover for attempting to dishonor me. That was the plot. But I give you my word—never once since I met you, looked into your eyes, have I kept faith with them. I double-crossed them. And today—after I say good—good-by to you—I'll tell them—"

"Ump-uum, sweetheart," returned Brazos enigmatically, and he felt rather than saw her sudden start.

They had almost reached Hall's saloon. Inskip stood at his post across the street; Kiskadden remained where Brazos had left him; Bilyen had not come out. Brazos laid hold of Bess's arm with his left hand, so that she could not break away from him. But she appeared unresisting, bewildered.

"Girl, when yu confessed all thet yu proved a lot. Yu won my respect—an' yu saved yoreself a term in prison if not yore life!"

With that he swung her with him into the door of Hall's saloon, and sent her whirling, almost falling toward Syvertsen and Orcutt, who were backing away from the window. Brazos leaped back in front of the door, so that he could face them and all the big room.

"*Everybody in heah freeze!*" he yelled, his voice loud with strident ring.

An instant silence contrasted strangely with the former clink and rattle and hum of the saloon. On the moment Kiskadden came sliding in behind Brazos, closely followed by Inskip. Then they backed slowly to Brazos's left step by step until the tables halted them.

On the other side Bess sagged against the wall, ashen of face, her piercing eyes on Brazos in a terrible comprehension. She knew that Syvertsen and Orcutt were trapped wolves. The staring crowd at the bar and at the gaming-tables divined the same, though they did not understand why. But the Norwegian and his swarthy ally divined nothing except the monstrous possibility that they might have been betrayed. Passion, not fear, transfixed them.

"Yu hellcat!" burst out Syvertsen. "What does this mean?"

His epithet, his cold query, acted upon the girl like a goad. She stiffened as her head swept up and back to the wall, knocking off her sombrero. Then she appeared a white-faced woman at bay.

"I told him!" she cried.

"*What!*" Syvertsen's word, like a bullet, might have been either question or ejaculation. It was Orcutt who flung at her: "You double-crossin' white-faced bitch! You told him what?"

"You bet your life I double-crossed you," she flashed, further inflamed. "I made love to Brazos Keene. Yes! But I *meant* it. And I've just told him the plot I had been dragged into—that I was your tool—to entice him—to get him drunk—or off his guard so *you* could kill him. To murder him because you had not the guts to fight him! That you'd been hired to do it!"

"You told him that—you told him who—" gasped Syvertsen, suddenly shaken from his icy fury.

"*Stop!*" thundered Brazos. He waited a moment for that command to sink in. "Yu're forgettin' I'm here. Yu ask *me*."

Both Bess's antagonists had actually forgotten the presence of Brazos Keene. They were rudely reminded of it and that the stiffness of the spectators, the silence, the strange position of the cowboy, bent a little, both brown

powerful hands extended a little low, and quivering—that all these constituted a tremendous menace. Then the significance of Brazos Keene dawned appallingly upon them. He confronted them. There was no escape. No matter by what incredible means this encounter had worked out, it was a reality. And the reputation of this fire-eyed cowboy might as well have been blazoned on the walls.

"Bess told me, but she didn't need to. All the time I knew it."

"There!" boomed Syvertsen, coming out of his trance to point a shaking finger at the wide-eyed girl. "You were the fool. He made love to you. He double-crossed *you*. All the time he knew! So he made *you* the fool. You betrayed us for his kisses."

"That's not true," flashed Bess, a dark scarlet staining her white cheek. "He never kissed me. And I don't believe he made a—a fool of me."

"Ask him. Look at him—an' ask him," shouted Orcutt, beside himself.

Bess swerved her fathomless gaze to the cowboy. "Brazos, is that true?"

Brazos did not answer, nor shift his narrowed gaze from the two men.

"Let her alone," he called bitingly. "What difference does it make to yu now? Orcutt—Syvertsen, I'm callin' yu for Allen Neece's murder! If yu ever got oot of heah alive yu'd swing. But then maybe yu might have too many powerful friends who'd clear yu of the rope. Miller, for instance, an' Bodkin, who's runnin' for sheriff—an' Raine Surface— Ahuh. Thet makes yu kinda pale aboot the gills. Wal, I reckon yu won't get oot of heah alive. I'm not trustin' the justice of Las Animas—nor yore cattle combine."

"Keene! You're clean—mad," broke out Syvertsen.

"Bard, I *told* you," rasped Orcutt in bitter accusation. "Shut your bellerin' trap an' take your medicine."

"You hombres murdered Allen Neece an' blamed thet job on me," went on Brazos relentlessly. "Yu murdered him because Surface wanted it done. An' yu schemed to put me oot of the way because Surface was afraid I'd take Allen Neece's trail. Wal, yu bet yore life I took it an' it ends right heah. Surface beat Abe Neece oot of Twin Sombreros Ranch. Yu men held up Neece thet night an' robbed him of the money he had to pay Surface for his cattle. An' yu-all sicked this girl on me 'cause none of yu had the nerve to meet me face to face— Wal, thet's my say. An' after all, yu're meetin' me face to face!"

As Brazos ended he read the desperate intent in Orcutt's eyes and beat him to a gun. Orcutt's heart was split even as he pulled trigger and his bullet hissed hotly by Brazos's ear.

Syvertsen, slow to realize and act, scarcely had his gun free when Brazos shot him through. The ball thudded into the wall. Syvertsen's vitality equaled his terrible fury. He did not fall. He did not lose sight or intent. But his muscular co-ordination had been destroyed. Fire and smoke belched from his wavering gun. His frown of immense surprise, his pale lighted eyes, his incoherent ejaculations of hate were all appalling to see.

Brazos had to end them all, though the man was mortally struck, by blowing out his brains. Syvertsen swayed from his lofty stature, to fall across a table, to slide from that into another, and to crash down.

The smoke cleared away disclosing Bess, back against the wall, her arms wide spread, with her gaze fixed terri-

bly upon the fallen men.

"He—killed—them?" she panted, as if dazed. "*Brazos Keene!*"

Suddenly she sprang out from the wall, an incarnate fury, formidable as a tigress.

"Bess," called Brazos, who had feared her reaction to the tragedy.

"You fooled me—to kill them!"

"Don't draw, Bess—*don't!*" warned Brazos shrilly.

"I'll kill you!"

As she whipped out her gun Brazos had to be quick to save his life. He took a shot at her arm, high up. The heavy bullet spun her around like a top and sent the little gun flying. Shrieking wildly she collided with the wall, bounced out to fall beyond the two dead men, where her boots pattered on the floor.

As Brazos sheathed his gun and knelt to lift her head she ceased the cry of agony. She gazed up at Brazos, fascinated, suddenly bereft of all hate and passion.

"Brazos—you shot me," she whispered accusingly.

"My Gawd, I did, girl! But why did you draw on me? Why did yu, Bess?"

"You made a fool of me."

"No. I swear I didn't. At least I didn't intend to. Yu did all the foolin', Bess."

"You've killed me—Brazos?"

"I'm terrible scared, Bess," replied Brazos, and he did not lie. He saw that he had hit her in the breast or shoulder, instead of in the arm. Blood was pouring out. He was afraid to open her blouse.

"It's better so. I deserve it. But to be killed by you, Brazos Keene—for loving you! Oh, what irony! Oh, my wasted life! The pity of it!"

Bilyen knelt beside Brazos. Kiskadden, Inskip—all the others crowded around, shocked and silent.

"Bess, if yu have to go—make it a clean job," said Brazos earnestly. "Confess. Tell the truth aboot this deal."

"The truth?" she whispered.

"Yes. Of Allen Neece's murder."

"Oh, I will, Brazos."

"Hank, Kiskadden—somebody get paper an' pencil. Take down what she says. An' all of yu listen. Yu'll be called to prove some things important to this range."

"I'm fainting— Whisky!" called the girl, almost inaudibly.

Somebody fetched a glass, and Brazos, with bloody hand, held it to her ashen lips. She drank.

"All right," she said, smiling up at him. "My right name is Bess Moore. I am not Syvertsen's wife. We belonged to Raine Surface's crooked outfit at Abilene. Surface is a man of two sides. One of them is black as hell. We were called here to put Allen Neece out of the way. I got him to drink—coaxed him to ride out of town with me. Orcutt roped him from behind bushes on the road—jerked him off his horse. As he lay on the ground Bard shot him—in the back. They carried him to the Hill cabin—left him in the loft— Then Brazos Keene rode up. Bard had a few words with Brazos—thought he deceived him. He rode back to town and fastened the crime upon Brazos. But our own plot miscarried—and lately—Surface called us again—to do the same job—over—"

"That'll do, Bess. Give me the paper, Kiskadden. Bess, can you sign yore name—heah?" importuned Brazos with strong feeling.

Bess signed her name and then fell back fainting.

Brazos, with shaking hands, tore

open her blouse, shivering at the white, swelling breast. He pulled the blouse down over the blood-stained shoulder to feel for the wound, frantic in fear that it would be too low. But it was not low. He found it high up, just where the arm met the shoulder, a bad, painful wound, but not in any sense dangerous to life.

"Aw!" Brazos burst out. "She's not bad hurt at all. She's only fainted. Hank, get somebody to help carry her to Hailey's. Call the doctor. An' when she comes to, tell her she's not gonna die an' I'll be back pronto."

Brazos snatched the paper from Bilyen and relinquished the girl to him. Then he stood up, tense and eager.

"It's aboot all, men, but not quite," he said as he carefully folded the confession. "Come with me. Yu too, Kiskadden, an' fetch somebody with yu."

At the foot of the Odd Fellows stairway Brazos halted to load his gun and wait for the followers he had outstripped.

"Brazos, is yore haid cool?" asked Kiskadden, breathing hard. "I ain't presumin' to advise yu. I'm just askin'."

"Speak oot, old-timer."

"It might look better to hold yore hand at Surface. Yu know the range—an' he has friends. Don't let them call this a gunman's spree."

"Wal, onless he goes for his gun—which he won't. Only I hope to Gawd he does! Come on an' step easy."

Inskip arrived with thumping strides, followed by men in twos and threes.

"Did yu search them?" asked Brazos, facing around from the stairway.

"Yes. Both well heeled. Bilyen took charge of money, papers, guns."

Brazos went up the stairs three steps at a time, and his followers strung after him, trying to step softly on heavy boots. The door of the hall stood open. Surface was holding forth with resonant voice.

"Gentlemen, all our fellow citizens were invited to participate here. Evidently those who stayed away were satisfied to leave important matters to us. We have all voted and the result assures Bodkin's election as sheriff of Las Animas. Formerly he was appointed by the Cattlemen's Association. That is a distinction with a difference."

Surface halted impressively for a moment, then resumed in strong voice:

"There remains to invite undesirable loafers, gamblers, dissolute women, suspected cowmen, and at least one notorious cowboy to leave Las Animas."

Brazos drew his gun and stepped into the hall. "Wal, Surface," he called ringingly, "heah's yore last-named undesirable—to talk for himself."

Surface stood on a platform facing a roomful of men, sitting in rows. A stiffening jerk appeared to run through them, but all of them turned to look.

"Set tight, everybody," ordered Brazos. "Surface, the jig's up!"

No noticeable change showed in the rancher's pale face. He had begun to weigh this intrusion. Kiskadden, Inskip, and others filed in with grave, grim visages. They must have meant as much, or more, to him as the advent of Brazos.

"Gentlemen, you come too late to participate in this election," he rolled out sonorously.

"Ump-umm!" retorted Brazos. "Surface, did yu heah me? I said yore jig

was up."

"What do you mean?" shouted Surface harshly.

"I just shot yore ootfit."

"Wha-at! Who?"

"Bard Syvertsen—Hen Orcutt—an' Bess!"

"*Dead!*"

"Wal, the girl lived to sign her confession."

Then a startling transformation made Surface another man.

"Yu're gonna heah thet confession read."

With left hand, watching the cattleman like a hawk, Brazos extracted the paper from his vest and held it back.

"Somebody read this."

Kiskadden took the paper and with slow deliberate voice, somehow more telling and inflexible for the cool Texas accent, he read it solemnly.

When he had finished, Surface seemed actually to have shrunken in stature. He opened his mouth several times as if to speak, but no words issued forth.

"Surface, I shore hope yu got the guts to throw yore gun, but I'm gamblin' yu've not," called Brazos in cold scorn.

The rancher flunked that challenge, and as that fact became manifest the stiff occupants of the seats began to scrape their boots nervously, to squirm and mutter, and at last to gaze at each other for angry confirmation.

"All right, Surface. I cain't waste time waitin'," went on Brazos. "March down heah."

Without protest Surface obeyed and when he reached the open space behind the chairs Brazos ordered him to halt and had him searched.

"Wal, so yu was packin' a gun!" drawled Brazos in derisive exclamation. "I wonder what'n hell for— Surface, yu're aboot as low-down as they come. If we was in New Mexico yu'd be strung up an' bored while yu was kickin'."

This speech from Brazos precipitated expression of the pent-up astonishment and wrath of the men whom Surface had addressed.

"*Shet up!*" yelled Brazos, suddenly inflamed. "Yu're hollerin' a little late against this man. Maybe most of yu air honest. But some of yu air crooked! An' it'll shore be best for yu-all, an' for Las Animas, to swaller the disgrace yu all gotta share."

Then he punched Surface in the back with his gun.

"Mosey along, yu! An' don't forget I'd jump at the chance to try oot yore specialty of shootin' men in the back."

Brazos marched Surface down the stairway to the street, and into the rancher's buckboard. Brazos climbed into the back seat.

"Drive oot to Neece's ranch," he called, loud enough for the gathering bystanders to hear.

"Neece's ranch! Where's that?" choked out Surface.

"Where do yu reckon, yu—robber? Twin Sombreros Ranch!"

The crowded sidewalks of Las Animas were then treated to the sight of another of Brazos Keene's peculiar actions. And it was of the most prominent citizen of that frontier town driving his team of black horses down the middle of the street with a gun at his back and behind that gun the cold-faced cowboy.

Brazos did not look to right or left, and he was too grimly concerned to enjoy that ride, or the gathering whoop which rang along the street and out of town with him.

In short order the spirited team arrived at the ranch.

"Surface, I want thet bag of gold."

"What—bag—of gold?"

"Yu know. Syvertsen held Neece up an' robbed him of it."

"That! I haven't got it," replied Surface.

"Wal, thet'll be too bad. Think again an' maybe yu'll remember. I heahed Bodkin an' Brad an' another man talk aboot thet bag of gold. Yu got it. Find it—or I'll bore yu pronto an' find it myself."

"All right. I—I'll get it," rejoined Surface thickly.

At the point of Brazos's gun the rancher led the way into the ranch house, and into his room, where from under the floor of a closet he dragged up an extremely heavy satchel.

"Open it," ordered Brazos eagerly.

Surface complied to expose packs of greenbacks and bags that gave forth a musical clink of precious metal.

"All right. Carry it oot."

Brazos had Surface drive him back as they had come. Groups of men stood on corners and in front of saloons. There was a crowd in front of Hailey's.

"Drive to the station, Surface. It's aboot time for the afternoon train."

With gun in hand Brazos saw that the deposed rancher bought a ticket to Abilene—saw him stand on the platform a target for all eyes—saw him mount the platform of the passenger coach of the train. Then he delivered himself of a final word.

"Surface, yu're gettin' off turrible lucky. Maybe it'll make yu think when I tell yu thet it's due to yore daughter. Get oot of Colorado an' stay oot. If I ever run into yu again I'll kill yu."

Brazos stalked back to the buckboard as the train pulled out. Through a window he saw Surface, white and haggard, stare out with unseeing eyes.

Bilyen came hurrying across the tracks carrying heavy gun belts.

"My Gawd—cowboy but yu're hard to keep track of," he panted.

"Hank, I let him off," said Brazos, as if the fact was incomprehensible. "First low-down rustler I ever weakened on—all 'cause of thet green-eyed, redhaided girl of his!"

"Best thing you could have done," rejoined Bilyen heartily. "Brazos, it may have been yore weakness for women, but it'll look different to hard-headed men of this range. But where'd yu go—what'd yu do?"

"Hank, I got thet bag of gold an' bills Syvertsen stole from Neece," declared Brazos triumphantly. "Heah, under the seat."

"You—dod-blasted amazin' son of a gun of a Texas cowboy!" ejaculated Bilyen, utterly confounded.

"Listen. Take this bag oot to Neece. An' yu drive him right in this heah buckboard oot to Twin Sombreros. Today! Tell June an' Janis their home is ready for them—an' no blood spilled oot there to spoil their homecomin'. Tell them they won't have to sling hash over the counter any more. An'—an' tell them I'll be goin' oot in the country for a spell, but I'll come back shore."

There were two windows in Bess's room, letting the sunlight flood in, to show her white, strained face on the pillow. But the fire, the hate, the passion were gone.

Brazos advanced to the bed as he

spoke to the woman in attendance. "Leave us alone a little, nurse."

"Howdy, Brazos Keene," said the girl, looking up with her unfathomable eyes.

"Howdy yoreself, girl," he replied, and carefully sat down on the bed. "Air yu in pain?"

"Not so bad now. It did hurt like hell, though."

"Close shave, Bess. Gosh, I was scared."

"You didn't mean to kill me?"

"Heavens no! I had to do somethin' pronto an' tried to wing yu."

"I wish you had killed me."

"Shore, yu mad girl. But I didn't. An' yu're gonna get over this, an' somewhere far from heah, live yore—yore trouble down, an' turn oot fine."

"Brazos! You believe that's in me?"

"Yes, I shore do."

"But won't I have to go to prison?"

"I should smile not. Bess, have yu any relatives or friends yu could go to?"

"Some friends back in Illinois. No kin, Brazos— Oh, how good you are! Back of all your deviltry. Kiss me, Brazos!"

He bent over and kissed her as he might have if she were indeed what she had tried to deceive him into believing.

"Oh, Brazos! What have you—done to me!" she cried brokenly, clinging to him.

"Wal, wearin' yu oot, for one thing," he replied, gently disengaging himself and rising. "I'll go now, sweetheart. Yu look most as turrible as when yu lay on the floor at Hall's an' I reckoned yu was dyin'— I've excited yu too much."

"You've broken—my heart—and made me bless you—for it—and want to—to live—and be—something again."

"Wal, think of breakin' a girl's heart an' makin' her the better for it!" drawled Brazos and he bent to kiss her again. "Thet's somethin' for a hombre like me to remember. I'll come down to the train an' see yu off."

She whispered something too faint for him to hear and her dark eyes followed him to the door.

Chapter Ten

Holiday

SITTING his horse, Brazos gazed with mingled feelings of relief, pain, and gladness down into Coglan's valley nestling between the last foothills and the rugged barrier of the mountains.

This valley was forty miles up in the foothills from Las Animas, a secluded spot once inhabited by Ute Indians, who still came down from the mountains occasionally. The tribe had moved on into a more inaccessible spot, driven farther by the advance of their unscrupulous foe—the white man. They were friendly to Coglan, Brazos remembered.

Wal, I reckon it was aboot time for me to hole up a spell, thought Brazos. *'Cause I'd shore got in a wuss fight somewhere. Them hombres with Bodkin thet night—Brad an' the other fellow—they kinda worry me. The job wasn't finished. I've a hunch I'll look up Bodkin someday, anyway. Heah I am, an' it's aboot time— or I'd been lookin' at red likker. Already I feel sorta loosenin' up around my gizzard. I'll chop wood 'till I drop, an' I'll pack a rifle up on those slopes—an' after a*

while maybe I'll let myself think—

Brazos rode on down into the valley and up to the log cabin among the firs. Two little girls were playing about the door. They ran like Indians. Presently a buxom, rosy-cheeked young woman looked out. The sight both startled and pleased Brazos. Coglan had gotten himself a wife.

"Evenin', lady," said Brazos, taking off his sombrero. "Is Coglan anywhere aboot?"

"He was. Get down an' come in, stranger."

Brazos had scarcely dismounted when Coglan appeared, ax in hand. He was a strapping man, still young, half hunter and half trapper, brown as an Indian.

"Howdy, Coglan," drawled Brazos, "I shore am glad to see yu."

"Brazos Keene, by Gawd!" ejaculated the mountaineer with a whoop. "You pestiferous, long-legged cowpuncher! Put her thar!" And he nearly crushed Brazos's hand.

"Hey, man, be careful of thet paw," yelled Brazos, trying to extricate it. "I just had to use it an' I might be needin' it bad."

"Haw! Haw! I figgered thet. Nothin' else would fetch you up hyar to see me. But you're welcome, cowboy, as the flowers in spring. Rose, this is an old pard of mine. Brazos Keene! We rode together in the Panhandle—an' but for him you wouldn't have me for a husband. Brazos, hyar's the little wife you always told me to get."

They made Brazos welcome and the little girls, owl-eyed and shy, came forth to capitulate.

Later Brazos and Coglan walked down to the corrals leading Brazos's horse.

"Coglan, I want to hang aboot heah for a month or so," Brazos was saying. "Chop wood an' hunt an' loaf. An' be alone. Yu know!"

"I savvy. Tell me when you feel like it or not at all."

"Wal, I'll get it off my chest," replied Brazos, and briefly related the Las Animas tragedy.

"So thet was it," said Coglan soberly. "I thought you looked kind of pale an' peaked. Another McCoy-Slaughter deal, eh? I've heerd of Surface. An' I've lost cattle this summer. I had about a thousand head."

"Wal, I reckon rustlin' will slow up for a spell," said Brazos thoughtfully.

"Hope you winter up hyar with me, cowboy," returned Coglan warmly.

"Aboot a month will be all. I'll sweat oot this poison. Gosh, I haven't had enough to eat lately to keep a grubline rider alive. Yu'll have to feed me up, Coglan. An' I want yu to ride in town once a week an' fetch me the news. Yu can make some excuse to call on Neece. Bilyen knows I'm gonna be heah. Yu can talk to him. I'll be powerful interested in all thet's goin' on. But don't tell anybody, especially the Neeces, thet I'm up heah."

Coglan's trips to town kept Brazos abreast of the latest developments. He learned that Neece was happily busy with his regained Twin Sombreros Ranch, and had gone into partnership with young Sisk. But he was alarmed to hear that Bodkin had been elected sheriff by popular vote, and that Raine Surface had been killed on the street in Dodge City.

Still Brazos stayed in the valley, until one October night he returned to the cabin to find Coglan back early from a trip. The rancher lacked his usual geniality.

"Bilyen says you're stayin' away too long. Bodkin is braggin' he will arrest you if you ever come back."

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Brazos incredulously.

"Wal, thet oughtn't to surprise you, Brazos," said Coglan tersely. "Sure we know his breed. Bodkin ain't very bright. He's like an animal. He soon forgets when the danger is gone— But I reckon Bilyen is keen about your reputation. He's sore. He knows soon as you come back to Las Animas thet Bodkin will shut his loud mouth."

"Gosh, I hope he does," replied Brazos ponderingly.

"There's a stranger lately dropped into town. Calls himself Knight an' says he's a cattle buyer for a big Kansas City firm. He an' Bodkin got thick pronto. Bilyen remembers seein' this man with Bodkin once last August."

"Wal, I'll ride down soon. Gosh, I hate to leave this valley! What else did yu heah, Coglan?"

"Not much. I didn't go out to Twin Sombreros. But I met Neece in town. No one would think he'd ever been down an' out. The Neece-Sisk-Henderson cattle deal went through. They're runnin' eighty thousand head."

"Thet's a solid combine. Reckon they're gonna buck the Miller ootfit. Neece is not goin' to get caught again. I reckon Bilyen is behind thet deal."

"They're buildin' a big barn at the ranch. Hauled in a sawmill. Hank says it'll be the biggest in Colorado. They got the roof up an' the floor down when the twins stopped work with an idee. To give a grand dance!"

"Twins—idee—dance?" echoed Brazos, suddenly intensely curious.

"So Hank said. An' thet if you didn't rustle down you'd miss a hell of a time."

"Aw, June wouldn't give a dance withoot me!" exclaimed Brazos, vaguely disbelieving.

"Girls are queer critters. You'd better rustle, Brazos."

Next morning Brazos paid vastly more attention to his appearance than was usual with him. His clean-shaven face, tanned with a hint of red, did not show a line nor a shadow. "Doggone it! I could look better," he soliloquized, dissatisfied. "But at thet I'm not so pore."

When he buttoned up his new gray coat he found that only the tip of his gun sheath, belted high, showed beneath it. That afforded him great satisfaction, but when he went out to ride to Twin Sombreros he left that coat open and hitched the gun sheath to its old place.

Chapter Eleven

Twin Trouble

FORDING the brook, Brazos rode through the pines down to the lane that came up from the pastures to the corrals and barns at the back of the ranch house. Presently he came upon the skeleton structure of a new barn, huge in dimensions. The floor was clean and shining. Benches had been built and set all around the wide square floor.

"By golly, I'm in time for thet dance."

Another new structure, probably of Surface's engineering, was a bunkhouse that almost could have rivaled Holly Ripple's at Don Carlos's Rancho. Saddle horses stood with bridles down, and cowboys watched Brazos's

slow approach. He reined in before them. How many times in his range life had Brazos surveyed such a group with narrowed gaze! On this occasion it left him favorably impressed.

"Howdy, cowboys. Is this heah Twin Sombreros Ranch?" he drawled.

"It sure is, cowboy. Get off an' be at home," answered one young fellow.

"Where's them twins? I want to hit them for a job ridin' heah."

"Fact is, stranger, we got so many bosses thet we don't know who's boss," said another clear-eyed youth, with a laugh.

"How many bosses?" queried Brazos, in pretended alarm.

"Mr. Neece, Henderson an' Sisk, Hank Bilyen an' Jack Sain."

"Doggone! Thet's an ootfit of bosses. I'll take my chance askin' the twins."

"Say, cowboy, you can't fool us. You're Brazos Keene," spoke up another.

"Who'n hell said I wasn't?" inquired Brazos mildly.

"Hey, Jack, come here," called Brazos's first interrogator, sticking his head into the door of the bunkhouse. "You're wanted."

Whereupon Jack Sain emerged to look, to stare, to give a whoop and thump clinking off the porch. No doubt as to his gladness! It shone in his eyes.

"Brazos! What you doin' on that hoss? Git down!" he yelled, leaping to meet Brazos's outstretched hand.

"Howdy, Jack. Gosh, but yu look fat to what yu was— *Heah!* careful of thet hand! I'm tolerably glad to see yu, Jack."

"Maybe I'm not. Why, cowboy, if you hadn't come, there wouldn't have been a dance. Bilyen was sore an' Neece was worried. An' the twins! They don't *ask* about you any more. They're mad!"

"Aw, thet's too bad. I'm doggone sorry."

"Where you been? You look great—young an' pert—somehow different."

"I been workin' oot. Jack, introduce me to these heah boys."

"Damn! Excuse my manners, Brazos, I clean forgot. This is Neece's outfit, picked by Bilyen. Fellers, walk forward an' meet Brazos Keene."

"Shore glad to meet yu-all," replied Brazos, and shook the hand of each in turn. They were the youngest, cleanest bunch of cowboys Brazos had seen for years. Then Hank Bilyen appeared on the scene.

At sight of Brazos he swore lustily. But the cloud left his tanned face. He beamed.

"Yu Texas ghost! I was scared stiff. Reckoned yu'd pulled yore old trick of ridin' away. Pile off so I can hug yu!"

Brazos warmed to this welcome, yet it gave birth to an incalculable regret. Was he not going to ride for Twin Sombreros Ranch?

"Come on to the house," said Hank eagerly. "Neece was just hollerin' aboot yu. He wants to go on puttin' up thet barn, so to get it done before the snow flies. An' he cain't go on with it because June and Janis wouldn't give the dance 'till yu come."

"Wal now, thet's doggone nice of them— Hank, do I look all right to yu? I'm kinda nervous."

"Nice? My Gawd! Yu look like Brazos Keene ten years ago—a pink-cheeked, curly-haided cowboy of sixteen, which you was when I met yu first at Doan's Post."

"Only ten years? I feel turrible old, Hank. But if I don't look it, what the hell? Say, isn't thet Henry Sisk on the porch?"

"Yep. One of Abe's pardners. Fine chap, but so lovesick he cain't be himself."

"Aw! Lovesick? Who with?" ejaculated Brazos in alarm.

"Janis. An' is she leadin' him a merry chase!"

Brazos's keen perception never had been any stronger than when he met Henry Sisk again. The young rancher was a gentleman but his courtesy did not deceive Brazos. He was not glad for the return of the cowboy. Then a resonant voice, dry and crisp, gave Brazos a thrill.

"By the Lord Harry! It's Brazos Keene."

Brazos turned on his heel to meet Neece, a transformed man he scarcely recognized.

"Howdy, old-timer," drawled Brazos, feeling his heart swell. Not since Cap Britt had bade him good-by had any man looked at him like that.

"Son, there ain't any use to try—tellin' you—" began the rancher with strong emotion.

"Wal, then, don't try," interrupted Brazos with his old slow smile. "I'll take yore word for it. Neece, yu shore look—wal, like what yore twins' dad ought to look."

"By Gad! I forgot. If we're ketched talkin' to you before *they* have their turn—"

The call of an excited girl cut Neece short. It came from the front of the ranch house, no doubt through the open door of the sitting room.

"Henry—*Henry!*" called the same voice, imperiously. "Come in here!"

As young Sisk hurried across the porch to enter the room, Brazos had a glimpse of a pale sweet face with wild dark eyes drawing back from the door.

"Girls, don't be bashful. Come out," called Neece gaily.

Henry reappeared precipitously, as if vigorous arms had given him impetus.

"Keene, you're wanted inside," he said gruffly. Apparently the ordeal was painful for him.

Sombrero off, Brazos crossed the threshold. One of the twins stood in the center of the room; the other closed the door behind him. Then they both met in front of him, pale, tremendously excited and inhibited, amber eyes darkly dilated. Brazos could not tell one from the other.

"Howdy—girls," he said huskily. "It's shore turrible good to see yu—heah."

"*Brazos!*" Twin voices in unison, deep, rich with emotion, drew him as a magnet. If it had been a feminine shrinking or a check to impulsive feeling that had momentarily frustrated the twins, it went into sudden eclipse. They were upon him, murmuringly, and soft cool lips touched his cheek at the same instant that sweeter lips, on fire, met his own.

Then Brazos, in a trance, found himself with two girls in his arms, and he felt throbbing breasts against his. The room whirled around him for a moment. If he thought at all, he did not care which was June and which was Janis. He did want to prolong that moment. It ended presently, however, with the girls drawing back, one of them scarlet, the other white. And Brazos, recovering his equilibrium, made the observance that the white-faced twin was the one who had kissed his mouth.

At that juncture the girls' aunt entered to welcome Brazos, and she was so sincere and kind, so apparently oblivious of his status and the violence

which had reinstated them at Twin Sombreros, that Brazos found himself at last.

"Wal, it was aboot time somebody rescued me," he drawled. "Miss Neece, yu just couldn't guess how glad I am to see yu."

"Thank you. I'd scarcely have known you, Brazos Keene."

"Isn't he wonderful, Aunt Mattie?" asked June with a blush. "*I* discovered him."

"Well, little Jan was around when it happened," said her sister subtly. "Brazos, let me show you my room."

"And mine, too," added June.

One at each arm they dragged the bedazzled cowboy from one beautiful room to another, then all over the house, and out into the yard, out toward the corrals, past the group of gaping cowboys, at last to the barn. June held forth on what a marvelous place it would be for her horses when winter came and Janis dilated on its desirability for their dance.

"Now you're here we can have it! When?" exclaimed June delightedly.

"Everybody is waiting," Janis exclaimed. "Let's say Friday night. That'll give us two days to decorate the barn with autumn leaves and flowers. And get the supper ready. Dad has a surprise for us—I don't know what. This will be the welcome home he had planned for us, June."

"Friday night—two days?" queried June dreamily, her eyes on Brazos. "It will be full moon."

They marched Brazos back to the house to announce with gay acclaim the date for the dance. Henry Sisk reluctantly obeyed their command to take the cowboys and go into the forest to fetch an abundance of autumn leaves and pine cones and ferns for ornament. The girls rushed in to confer with their aunt.

Janis poked her head out to call: "Cowboy, don't you go riding away!"

"Son, when will you take charge?" asked Neece.

"Yu mean of yore ootfits? Gosh!"

"I mean of mine. Henderson has his own foreman. An' Sisk his. They've got pretty good outfits, in my judgment. But I depend a lot on Bilyen."

"What's Hank's job gonna be?"

"Hank will buy an' sell cattle."

"Fine. He's a shrewd hombre an' honest as noonday. Coglan told me yu was runnin' eighty thousand haid. Is thet so, boss?"

"More by a few thousand."

"Ahuh. I don't know as thet is so good," rejoined Brazos thoughtfully.

"Hank wasn't so keen about it, either. But I am. I'd rather have Henderson in with me with all his money an' bankin' interests, an' young Sisk, than tackle it alone with only the ten thousand head Surface left me."

"Neece, yu're an old-timer. It'll mean drawin' rustlers like molasses draws flies."

"There won't be any more wholesale rustlin'. I've been thirty years on the frontier. An' I've seen the cattle business grow. It's about at its peak now. An' I've never seen big raids on any range but once. Did you?"

"Wal, come to think aboot it—I reckon no. But all the same a steady stealin' of stock in small bunches cain't be sneezed at."

"Brazos, I'll lose less throwin' in with my pardners, an' runnin' a hundred thousand head, than if I stay out an' run one-tenth of that number."

"Sounds sensible. Why isn't Hank keen aboot it?"

"Bilyen is not against it, but he's not

crazy about it. Says such big herds invite all kinds of range trouble from stealin' by rival combines an' out-an'-out rustlers to corruptin' cowboys."

"Wal, Hank is shore right."

"Brazos, we're goin' to find out before the snow flies."

"Heah comes Hank now, in a buckboard. Gosh, them blacks look kinda familiar!"

"Where you goin', Hank?" queried the rancher, as Bilyen drove to a halt.

"Town. Got a list longer'n yore laig—all for thet darn dance."

"Hank, I've been talkin' with Neece heah. He says yu're not keen on his combine an' the big herd."

"Wal, air yu, Brazos?" parried Bilyen.

"Shore I am. The more the merrier." Brazos deliberately contradicted his opinion to Neece for reasons of his own.

"To be honest, I feel all right aboot it now, 'cause yu're heah, Brazos."

"Ahuh. Wal, what was on yore chest before I got heah?"

"Mebbe I'm a little personal. I got a grudge against Bodkin. An', I ain't so damn friendly toward this new cattleman Knight."

"Bodkin kinda rubs me the wrong way, too, boss," returned Brazos broodingly. "He was crooked. I know. I heahed him talk with two men I didn't know. But all of them was in thet deal, an' all of them was ready to double-cross Surface. It was from them I heahed aboot the bag of gold I got back for yu. They were all huntin' for thet. An' Coglan told me the talk had it thet this man Knight is the hombre who shot Surface."

"Wal, they've side-tracked thet talk. Brazos, do yu reckon Bodkin's bein' elected sheriff will make him go straight?"

"Not in a million years!"

"Thet will simplify the problem for Neece," declared Bilyen, gathering up his reins. And he drove off without another word.

"What'd thet sore-haided Texan mean, anyhow?" queried Brazos irritably, when he knew perfectly well what Bilyen meant.

"Drive Bodkin out of Colorado," replied Neece grimly. "Thet'd break up this range ring."

"Yu cain't drive thet hombre oot of Las Animas."

"Brazos, you can't *kill* him," declared Neece seriously. "Bodkin has been elected sheriff by the citizens of this county. This time he wasn't appointed. He's our first elected officer. If you kill him you'll be an outlaw."

"Ahuh. I was thinkin' aboot thet."

"Bodkin is not goin' to be caught brandin' calves or dealin' with rustlers. He's going to play safe from now on."

"All the same, he's crooked, Neece. An' half the town knows it if the other half is blind. Even if none of them—not even yu or Hank—*I* know. Absolutelee! An' it makes a rotten situation for me, if I go to ridin' for yu."

"*If!* For land's sake, Keene, don't say you might not. Why, I'm relyin' on you. Thet's what got Henderson to throw in with me. Besides you're goin' to be a son to me, aren't you?"

"My Gawd—I'd like to be," gulped Brazos.

"June told me thet she'd guarantee your ridin' for me. An' Jan said *she* could get you if June couldn't."

"Help!" cried Brazos in a weak voice. Then after hanging his head a moment he looked up to speak feelingly. "Neece, I'm thankin' yu for yore

trust an' likin'. An' I'm shore proud thet June—an' Janis, too—wants me heah. I'll come, boss, an' ride my damnedest for yu."

"Good! Thet relieves me. An' it'll makes the girls happy," replied the rancher with great satisfaction. "I reckon it's a delicate situation for you, Brazos. Wild cowboy an' gunman thet you are—thank God!—you still have pride an' honor. You might feel compunctions against askin' me for June or Janis, because you are who you are. But I'll declare myself before you ask me—I'd like you to take Allen's place. Don't worry about decidin' between the twins. They'll settle your hash pronto, an' it doesn't make any difference to me. Now thet's off my mind. Let's go in an' drink to it."

After dinner the twins dragged Brazos, Neece, Henry, and Bilyen out to the barn, and collected Sain and the cowboys on the way. Already heaps of evergreen, boughs of pine with the cones intact, and branches of different-colored autumn leaves lay upon the floor.

Happily Brazos took orders from the twins and spent the afternoon balancing precariously on a ladder, putting up the leafy decorations. There came a time when he was alone with June, hidden from the others by a great bower of leaves. Brazos daringly made love to her, crushed her to him despite her murmured objections that the others might see them.

"Darling," Brazos begged, "yu gotta be more of a sweetheart."

"Brazos, I've been the—the faithfulest sweetheart you ever had. If you only knew!"

"June, I mean a lovin' sweetheart. I'm the kind of a hombre thet's got to have kisses—millions of kisses."

She uttered a little laugh, easy to misinterpret. "I rather guessed that. You're so sure of the number—I wonder if you're as sure of where they're *all* to come from."

But she yielded easily to his tender clasp and shyly held up her lips. Her kiss was cool—sweet—quick, gathering something as it ended.

"There! one on account— Wait! they're calling me. I'll be back soon."

"June!" came the clamoring cry from outside the leafy bower.

She slipped away from Brazos, with a touch, a look that convinced him she wanted to stay there in his arms. Brazos stood staring after her in the gathering rosy gloom of the great barn. He did not attend particularly to the argument going on at the other end. He was still under the spell of June's shy surrender, her half promise, and he waited with strong impatience for her return. There would surely be a moment more. Dusk was falling. The cows were lowing in the fields. Then the supper bell put an end to the animated discussion that had disrupted Brazos's moment of bliss.

"Come on, Brazos," yelled the merry voice of Jack Sain.

"Doggone!" muttered Brazos.

"Hey, Texas, we're knockin' off for supper," called Bilyen.

Brazos stood there with a sense of blank disappointment, a letting down of his expectant mood, listening to the voices and footsteps receding. Then his heart leaped at a quick light patter of feet that slowed, halted significantly outside the booth.

A slender form in white stood framed in the darkening doorway of foliage.

"Aw, heah yu air!" whispered Brazos with a passionate resurgence of feeling.

"Oh, I couldn't see you— They sent me back—"

Perhaps it was his sudden looming right over her that checked her gay voice. He saw her face, pale against the background of leaves, her eyes unnaturally large and dark.

"Yu never found a daid man," said Brazos, snatching her off her feet.

"*Brazos!*" All her slender form appeared to leap with a divinely startled convulsion, but it did not strike Brazos that it was resistance. His surprise attack gained something from his disappointment. He gathered her up tight in his arms and as he kissed her eyes shut she cried out:

"Oh!—please don't!—Mercy! Ah!" And with that Brazos's thirsty lips closed hers and he spent his ardor in long, lingering kisses.

"There! Thet shore was—comin' to yu—lady," panted Brazos, as her head dropped back, her eyes closed under mystic lids.

They opened. "Cowboy devil!" she whispered, both tone and look impossible to read.

Nevertheless Brazos translated them in his own behalf.

"No—more," she cried frantically and, surprising Brazos with sudden strength, she freed herself and fled.

Brazos followed, still in a transport. But as he got out of the gloom of the barn into the open where it was light he sustained a return of rationality.

One of the boys had waited and in a moment more Brazos recognized Henry Sisk.

"What'd you go back for?" he asked in low voice.

"What'd you—drag June—away for?" panted the girl, as she reached him.

"I took her for *you!*" returned Sisk, in anguish.

"Ha! Ha!"

Janis's sweet laugh not only silenced Sisk but also made a stone image of Brazos. The couple hurried on to catch up with the others down the lane. Brazos stood there in the summer twilight as suddenly stiff and cold as if he had been turned to stone, his consciousness capable of only one thought: *My Gawd, if it wasn't Jan!*

Chapter Twelve

Who's Who of 1880

DURING the rest of that evening Brazos sought the safety of numbers. But just the same, he was conscious of June's observance of him, as if she knew what a fool he was, and of Janis's smiling radiance, as if she had a secret not to keep long from the world. One other shared it, of that Brazos was sure, and he was Henry Sisk. Jack Sain betrayed a curiosity beyond jealousy, but something that would eventually probe to the bottom of the mystery. And as the evening wore on Brazos began to grow suspicious of the others.

"Wal, folks," he said at an opportune moment, "I'm gonna say good night an' ride back to town."

"What's the sense in thet?" spoke up Neece quickly. "This is your home. An' Hank can fetch your pack tomorrow."

"Please don't go, Brazos," added June, suddenly anxious.

"Brazos Keene, you've got a job," piled on Janis, with a merry subtlety impossible to interpret. "This Neece outfit is getting obstreperous. You can't run it gallivanting to town."

"Wal, I reckon I cain't run it if I stay," replied Brazos, for whom the humor of the situation had ceased.

"I was only fooling," said Janis hurriedly.

"Why must you go?" pouted June.

"Wal, since yu call my hand," drawled Brazos, exaggerating his cool habit of speech, "the fact is there's a couple of hombres in town thet I forgot aboot shootin'."

Blank surprise and silence ensued upon Brazos's reply. As Brazos had intended, they could not tell whether he was in jest or earnest.

"So long. See yu-all in the mawnin'," he concluded, and left the room. Hank Bliven followed him out on the porch, and one of the twins caught up with them.

"Brazos—wait," she faltered.

"Cowboy, I'll have yore hawss heah in a jiffy," said Hank, and thumped off the porch.

Brazos had taken a step down, but turned to look at the girl, whose face was on a level with his.

"You are—angry?" she asked.

"Not atall—an' which one of these heah Neece girls air yu?"

"Brazos! I'm June. Don't look at me like that. We were only in fun—and they coaxed—nagged me into it."

"Into what?" queried Brazos bluntly. June's distress told him there was something in the wind of which he had had no inkling.

"You've guessed it—haven't you?"

"Ump-umm, I'm a pore guesser. An' I'm a pore social cuss, too. I reckon I don't belong heah."

"Oh, Brazos, you *are* angry," cried June, and she looked back to beckon Janis, who stood with white face and wide eyes in the light of the door. But Janis did not come. "See! Jan leaves it all on my shoulders. And look at Dad and Jack! Laughing like hyenas! Brazos, I don't blame you—but forgive *me*, darling."

This was so astounding and delicious that Brazos could not resist prolonging it.

"Wal, June, I'm not a forgiving cuss, either—when I see I'm bein' made fun of."

"Now they're making fun of me, too," protested June. "They put up a job on us, Brazos."

"Ahuh. Suppose yu tell me aboot it."

"Darling!"

"Awful sweet talk, June, but not gettin' us anywhere."

"But don't be such a stranger to me," she wailed. "Brazos, would—would you be terribly angry if I—I confessed something I said about—about you and me?"

"No. If it was true I'd like yu the better."

"You remember tonight before supper—when you and I were alone in the stall?"

"Wal, I'm not liable to forget."

"We must have been there a long time. It was almost dark. They teased me unmercifully. Even Dad! I got mad. Jan didn't help it any, believe me. So I said, 'I guess no one has a better right to be alone with Brazos Keene. And if *this* is all you called me for, I'm going back.' Well, Jack Sain grabbed me. They dragged me out of the barn. Oh, they were full of mischief. And then they sprang the joke on me. That same old trick that has got me into a peck of trouble lots of times! Sent Janis back. Let her pretend to be me. She would string you along until we got in to supper. I objected. I didn't like it. I didn't want to. But *Jan did!* And always I'd do anything under the sun for her. So I weakened and she went.

"Henry was the only one who was sore. He *was* sore. He waited. And Jan kept you there in the barn so long that all of us but Henry ran off. When Jan came in alone with Henry, who was black as a thundercloud, and you didn't come—then they guessed the joke hadn't gone so good. Jan was mysterious. She kept mum. She didn't care a whoop how mad Henry was. But she couldn't fool *me*. Jan doesn't have that white look and those black eyes for nothing. Something had happened while she was pretending to be me. And I've been frantic ever since."

"Wal, I shore took Jan for yu, all right," declared Brazos with a grim satisfaction.

"Oh, Brazos—you—you didn't—"

"Let yore imagination run high, wide, an' handsome, June, an' maybe yu'll get somewhere."

"Brazos! I'll bet you were too smart for them. You knew Jan!" exclaimed June hopefully. "You played up to them. Poor Jan! No wonder she was so strange—so tense. Served her right! Oh, Brazos, I'm horribly jealous, but if you guessed the trick I—I can stand it. Only Jan worries me— Do you forgive me, Brazos?"

"Shore, sweetheart, I'd forgive yu anythin'. But I'm not so shore aboot Jan an' Jack an' yore dad."

"Now you're my old Brazos again," murmured June. "I'll be a match for them next time. Brazos, let's play a terrible joke on them."

"I should smile. How aboot elopin'?"

"Oh! Brazos, you're not serious?" cried June, aghast yet intrigued at the idea.

"Shore am. We could slope off in the mawnin'—get to Dodge City long enough to slip thet bridle on yu—then come back to the dance."

"Glorious! But—but—"

"Then it wouldn't make so much difference whether or not I took yu for Jan," drawled Brazos dryly.

"Wouldn't it, though?" flashed June. "Brazos Keene, I agree with Jan. Nobody can be quite sure of you."

"If yu were my wife, wouldn't yu feel tolerable safe?"

"Don't tempt me, Brazos. If we eloped it'd hurt Dad. And there's no need of hurry. I—I'd like it! But I mustn't. Another thing—Jan would never forgive me."

"For marryin' me!" ejaculated Brazos.

"No. For not telling her. We'll wait, Brazos dear—if you can be true to me."

"I shore can if yu'll only wear somethin' or do somethin' so I cain't mistake yu for Jan again."

"I guess you don't really want to," she said reproachfully. "It must be great fun for a cowboy, especially when his fiancée's sister doesn't run away from him."

"Aboot as funny as bein' piled off yore hawss. June, will you promise to give me a hunch, so I'll know yu?"

"Yes. I promise, Brazos. I'll think up something that no one else can tell."

"June, do yu reckon they-all took yu to mean we air engaged?" asked Brazos wistfully.

"No, they didn't. Dad never mentioned it. And Jan laughed in my face. Then she tried to pump me. Oh, she worries me, Brazos."

"Wal, if yu had my state of mind aboot thet girl yu'd be loco— Have yu got any nerve, darlin'?"

"Nerve? Yes. For what?"

"Jan has backed into the room. Gosh, her eyes look like burnt holes in a blanket. They're all peekin' oot at us. Makes me kinda sore. How aboot

kissin' me good night? Thet'll fix them."

"Oh, I haven't that—much nerve," faltered June. "I might—"

"Jan would have in yore place," interrupted Brazos, a little bitterly.

"If I had your nerve I know what *I'd* do," retorted June.

"Aw, heah comes Hank with my hawss."

"Pooh! Who cares for Hank— Brazos, Brazos, you may grab me—hug me like a bear—kiss me good night, then run."

"June!"

"Yes—and explain to Dad tomorrow."

Dared thus and spurred by June's provocative smile, Brazos brazenly availed himself of the sweet privilege. It made his head whirl so that he nearly fell down the steps.

"Say, cowboy, what'n hell's got into yu?" queried Hank in mild concern, as Brazos swung into his saddle.

"Gawd only knows, Hank," drawled Brazos with his cool laugh. "I might be ridin' away from Don Carlos's Rancho. So long, Texas."

Brazos had a fleeting glimpse of the disheveled June standing slim and lovely in the light with her hands over her face.

It was midnight when Brazos reached town, and next day he slept late, a luxury he seldom indulged in. And after he awakened he lay in bed, realizing that in broad daylight, with the sun pouring golden in at his window, he could not feel the same as he did in the black midnight hours. He was wonderfully happy. And that exalted mood lasted until, booted, spurred, and gun-belted, he walked out up the street of Las Animas.

He had not taken a dozen steps from Mexican Joe's when a cowboy, a lean hard-faced youth, sauntered out of a doorway.

"Howdy, Keene," he said, as if in casual greeting. "I been walkin' the street for an hour watchin' for you."

"Howdy, cowboy," returned Brazos slowly.

"Gimme a match. Make this look natural," returned the other.

"Ahuh. Heah yu air. Talk fast, stranger."

The cowboy took the match and lighted his cigarette leisurely, but he spoke rapidly.

"Last night at Hall's—heerd two men talkin'—Brazos Keene in town—Knight swears we're to git him at any cost—Bodkin' rarin'."

The cowboy raised his young hard visage, puffed a cloud of smoke, and turned away.

"Thanks, pard," said Brazos, and went on as before. *Doggone! Thet's hot. I reckon thet cowboy risked his life an' knew it. They're gonna try to shoot me in the back. Bodkin again!*

Brazos went in the first store and out the back way, where he proceeded along the alley to a side street from which he reached the corral where he had left his horse. The Mexican boy, Pedro, had fed and watered Bay. Brazos lost no time riding out of town. The conclusion he reached was that Bodkin had taken up with this Knight —that they were going to proceed on the lines Surface had developed—and that such operations were retarded because of the unwelcome existence of one Brazos Keene.

The approach of winter might have necessitated renewed activity on the part of cattle rustlers. Cattle had gone up in price to forty-three dollars on the hoof with increasing demand. Neece had seen this coming and he had

bought wholesale, getting some small herds for as low as thirty dollars a head.

When Brazos arrived at Twin Sombreros he rode in with little thought of the distracting sisters and the gala supper and dance to be held that evening. As luck would have it June or Janis called gaily to him from the house, but Brazos only waved without stopping. He found a merry bustling crowd of cowboys working to enhance the autumn effect desired by the girls.

"Heah, one of yu rollickin' gazabos," he called. "Tell Neece an' Bilyen I want them pronto."

The rancher was the first to reach Brazos and he wore the warm smile he had acquired for this cowboy.

"Mornin', son. You look pretty serious. Scared of bracin' Dad after last night, eh?"

Brazos had to grin. No fear of this father's censure or criticism! Neece was on his side.

"Scared as hell, Dad, now yu make me think of last night. But thet wasn't on my mind atall."

Hank Bilyen joined them at this juncture. "Mawnin', Brazos," said the Texan, his gray gaze studying Brazos's face.

"Come heah," returned Brazos, and drew the two aside.

"Aw, yu're gonna bust up the party," complained Hank, a sense of calamity evidently striking him.

"Ump-um. Not atall. I've got a tip, though. Cattle gone to forty-three dollars. It'll be forty-five in less'n a week, an' goin' up."

"You don't say!" ejaculated the rancher eagerly. "Hank, my hunch was correct."

"Wal, I was holdin' at forty for this fall. But forty-five! Say, Neece, we're settin' with a powerful good hand."

"How many haid can yu drive in an' ship pronto, inside the week?" queried Brazos thoughtfully.

"Close to twenty thousand if the railroad can handle them," replied Neece promptly.

"I saw hundreds of empty stock cars as I rode oot. Neece, yu can beat the other cattlemen to it, an' save, I reckon, half thet twenty thousand—if yu rush the ootfit."

"Save! What yu mean, cowboy?" asked Bilyen, darkly suspicious of his young friend.

"Wal, there's a lull in rustlin' just now, but it won't last long onless this ootfit Surface left behind gets ripped up the back. Neece, it'd be a good bet to sell all the railroad can handle."

"I'll grab it pronto, Brazos, thanks to you."

"How aboot Henderson an' Sisk? Can they grab it pronto, too?"

"No. Henderson's stock is scattered all over the range. Sisk's is on his ranch forty miles out. Rough country. It'd take a month to round up a big bunch."

"Too late for the top price—an' too late to beat the rustlers."

"Hank, I tried to get Sisk an' Henderson to see this very thing—that is, the price of beef goin' up. I didn't figure on rustlers. Brazos, how can they get away with any large numbers of cattle?"

"Wal, it does seem ootlandish, with law an' order in Las Animas," rejoined Brazos with a grim laugh. "Boss, ten hard-ridin' rustlers can move a heap of stock. None of thet stock would come heah. They'd shove it along the line, an' have it shipped the day it got to the railroad, long before the owners found oot. Some of it would be throwed in with the shipment of cat-

tlemen we reckon air crooked. Aw, it's easy enough. Too damn easy!"

"I'll go write telegrams to my buyers an' order all the stock cars available. Hank, you can ride in with these at once," said Neece decisively, and hurried away.

"Come oot with it, darn yore pictoors," demanded Hank gruffly.

"Wal, it's nothin' new, but kinda worrisome, considerin' the mix-up I'm in heah," answered Brazos, and he gave Hank the information he had received from the strange cowboy in town.

The Texan swore mightily and to no purpose, which verbiage Brazos received in silence.

"I knowed somethin' was in the wind, else yu'd never advise Neece to sell stock so pronto. Doggone lucky for Neece! We can ship thet number of cattle before the price drops or a hoof of it can be rustled. But what'n the hell air yu gonna do?"

"Me? Aw, I better lay low."

"Bodkin! Damn his yellow gizzard! All Bodkin! Brazos, do yu reckon thet hombre *knows* yu can't kill him?"

"He's just aboot smart enough to figure it," admitted Brazos.

"Who ever heahed of such a goddam muss!" growled Hank. "If this was only Texas!"

"But it's not Texas. It's Colorado, where they got law an' order," declared Brazos bitterly.

"Where's layin' low gonna get yu, cowboy?"

"I don't know. It's all I can think of."

"They'd reckon yu was scared an' rustle the hair off this range."

"Shore. But they'd hang themselves sooner or later. Las Animas won't stand it forever."

"No, I reckon not. All the same they're daid slow."

"Slow? Say, Texas, they're not alive. The trouble is each cattleman heah suspects his neighbor. Yu know, Hank, thet kind of deal is hard to handle. It just might last until this range has seen its best days."

"Nope, it won't, 'cause the haids of this combine, Bodkin an' Knight, Miller mebbe, whoever they air, don't stock up enough gray matter."

"Hank, I just oughta ride away," said Brazos tragically.

"Shore. Thet old dodge of yores would fit in heah," rejoined Bilyen with sarcasm that made Brazos flinch.

"Only I cain't."

"An' why cain't yu?"

"It's not humanly possible for me to leave this girl."

"Brazos, I'd be damned if I would, either."

"If only June would run off with me! We could come back after these hombres peter oot."

"June? Say, cowboy, we reckoned it was Janis."

"*We?* Who'n hell air we?" jerked out Brazos with a start.

"Why, me, an' Neece—an' some of the boys. Leastways Jack."

"Jack Sain? The two-faced son of a gun! He's crazy aboot June himself. Thet's why he—"

"Jack is honest," interposed Bilyen. "An' Neece reckons yu're sweetest on Janis."

"Neece? Aw, my Gawd!" ejaculated Brazos, throwing up his hands.

"Cowboy, ain't yu kinda mixed up yoreself aboot *which* one of the twins yu're daid set on?"

"Mixed up? I'm standin' on my haid right this heah minute. Hank, I love June, honest an' true—but—aw! it's orful—I cain't tell her from Jan."

The Texan laughed so hard that Brazos wanted to punch him. "Haw! Haw! Haw! Doggone–me." He choked, trying to talk. "Yu're not in any mix-up. Oh–no! Yu reckon it's June, but yu cain't tell her from Jan! One's the same as the other–thet settles yore hash, Brazos Keene."

"Hank, I could get mad at yu–yu damned ole muddlehaid," declared Brazos, red in the face. "Now what'n hell do yu mean by thet last crack? Yu saw me kiss June last night."

"Shore, Brazos, but thet only proved yu're in love with them both."

"Yu're a damn liar."

"An' yu're plumb lucky," returned Bilyen curtly. "There's safety in numbers. Yu been playin' fast an' loose with two fine girls."

"Wal, I'll be dod-blasted," muttered Brazos, as his friend strode away, plainly offended. "What the devil did he mean by lucky–an' safety in numbers?"

The rustic pine-cone lanterns up and down the lane leading from the barn to the ranch house were lit, as were the oil lanterns in the colorful barn and the big locomotive lamp that had been fastened high on a post. Huge bonfires added to the cheerful night scene. And the moon soared above the black range, full and white and radiant. Then the crowd of girls, some in white, and most in bright hues that matched the autumn leaves, flocked down the lane with gay voices and merry laughter, to meet the eager young men waiting at the barn. Last came the older folk, less brilliantly garbed, but quite as merry and as happy. Voice and mirth of all were drowned in a burst of rhythmic music.

Brazos was surrounded by the glad throng, although none appeared to notice him, and he drew to one side, with a feeling of detachment. He was beginning to lose something of the thrill and uncommon pleasure that possessed him, when a soft little hand slipped inside his. Brazos turned to find a vision in white beside him, with lovely face uplifted to his and dark eyes the dullest of men could have read aright.

"It's June," she said simply. "How do you like my New York gown?"

"Girl–I never knew yu were so beautiful," replied Brazos rapturously.

"Come. This first dance is yours. I chose a long waltz, because you told me you liked waltzing."

They had whirled scarcely more than a quarter way round the big barn when June looked up to whisper: "You said you were a clodhopper on your feet."

"Wal, I am–in my boots."

"Brazos, you can dance–but you hold me a little too tight–for public–"

"Aw, I don't know whether I'm dancin' or ridin' or sailin'. An' June, if I didn't hold yu like this–I'd not know I had yu in my arms–yu're so like a fairy."

"Don't talk–flatterer!"

They danced on and Brazos thought that he was indeed sailing around an enchanted glade in the autumn woods. Yet he preserved his equilibrium enough to lead her through the whirling throng of dancers. But toward the end the sense of rhythmic dreamy movement, the murmuring voices of girls, the bright dresses, the scarlet flare of autumn leaves, and the entrancing feel of June so soft against his breast–these went to Brazos's head like wine.

"Brazos–you're–hugging–me," June whispered pantingly.

"Am I? Doggone! I hadn't noticed it," he drawled, loosing his hold ever so little.

"Everybody—else—has."

"June, if my eyes air not pore, they're all doin' the same."

"Jan saw. She looked—daggers at me."

"Wal, don't yu look— Aw, it's over! How could thet happen? June, I reckon I never had so wonderful a dance."

"Not even at that famous dance of Holly Ripple's—with *her?*"

"Wal, thet was wonderful, too. But not like this one with yu. Yu see, Holly wasn't my sweetheart."

"I don't see. I should have thought she'd be mad about you. Brazos, do you want to please me?"

"More than anyone."

"Make yourself agreeable to the girls who haven't beaux, and some of the older women. You can be so nice! It's a chance. It'll make them like you—and help our party to success. Will you, Brazos?"

"Goodness only knows how I can, but I'll manage. But how aboot Janis?"

"Jan will have three partners for every dance. But you must get a part of one, at least. She'd blame me if you didn't."

"I'll bet I cain't get within a mile of her—or yu, either, after this. Look at these buckaroos pilin' over each other to get at yu!"

"Brazos, I'll hunt you up," she flashed, and was whirled away.

The hours fled like the dances; the pine cones burned out; the big bonfires were replenished; many of the young men and some of the girls went often to the great bowl of punch that Neece had ordered must be kept full; and the moon climbed high to burn white in the blue dome above.

At midnight supper was served for the younger folk on the wide porch, and in the long sitting-room of the ranch house for the elders. Brazos ate his food standing, as many times he had done beside a chuck wagon on the Old Trail.

Soon the dancers flocked back to the barn, lured by the strains of music. Brazos watched them from the porch, a little wistfully, wondering when June would hunt him up. Then a white hand slipped under his arm.

"Come, cowboy," called a challenging voice.

"Aw, heah yu air!" cried Brazos.

"Quick. They're after me. Run!" she said, with a giggle, and led him into the pines instead of down the lane. In a moment they were out of sight of the ranch house, the lights, and in another almost out of hearing of the merry hum.

Then they walked hand in hand. Brazos's heart seemed full to bursting. There was no need of talk. The pines black-barred the silver glades. The girl stopped to confront Brazos, though she did not let go of his hand.

"Where have you been all these hours?" she asked. The moonlight enhanced her loveliness, blanched her oval face, darkened her unfathomable eyes. Brazos divined that she had given him the opportunity he had longed for.

"I've been helpin' make yore party a success. Didn't think it was in me! Dancin' with old maids, doin' the elegant with the wives and mothers, makin' a waiter oot of myself. But it was fun, an' did me good."

"Brazos, that was sweet of you," she returned warmly.

"Wal, don't yu want to reward me?" he drawled softly.

"Yes." As she spoke that forceful word Brazos caught a hint of something as strange as lovely about her. In the magic of the moonlight all her charm and mystery appeared magnified.

"Would a—a kiss be too much?" he asked hesitatingly.

"Too little!"

Brazos kissed her and trembled on the brink of the unknown. She stood there, slender and white in the silvered radiance, eyes intent on him, lips upturned.

"Girl, don't look at me like thet—you said yes."

"I also said 'too little'!"

Brazos's restraint broke at that, and he took her in his arms, but did not avail himself of the repetition of that challenging surrender. Still she held back from closer contact with him, somewhat stiffly.

"Tell me yu'll marry me?" he demanded, suddenly strong and vibrant with released emotion.

"Ah-h!" she gasped, and as if the strength had left her limbs she sank upon his breast. Brazos held her closer and closer, bending his head over hers, to put his cheek upon her fragrant hair.

"Did thet surprise yu, darlin'?"

She stirred her head in soft motion Brazos took to be affirmation.

"But it shouldn't have?"

"Who could be sure of—Brazos Keene?" she whispered.

"Wal, yu should be. I love yu turrible, lass. Say yu love me."

"I adore—you!"

"Say when yu'll marry me?"

"Oh, what will Dad and sister say?"

"They'll be glad. But never mind them. Honey, I cain't wait much longer. Yu blessed twins air drivin' me crazy. Say when, precious?"

"When do you—want me?" she whispered, very low.

"Aw! Why, I hate to rush yu, darlin'. But there's a reason, yu know. I'm a marked man in Las Animas. I oughta go away 'till those hombres forget they wanted to kill me."

"*Brazos!*" She roused to passionate life in his arms.

"I told yu, darlin'," he expostulated.

"Oh, my Brazos! I—I will marry you."

"When? The sooner the better."

"We'll elope!" she cried thrillingly.

"Wal, thet'd be easiest 'an' safest for me. Yore dad wouldn't hold it against me."

"We'll do it!" Suddenly she appeared transformed into a little whirlwind, throwing her arms around his neck, rumpling his hair with furious little hands, at last to draw his head down to kiss him with lips of sweet fire. "Oh, Brazos! I've been dying for you," she burst out with inarticulate cry. "You won me—even though I thought you a devil with girls—a trifler! All the time—all the time I thought it was June you loved!"

Chapter Thirteen

A Startling Solution

FOR an appalling instant, Brazos, in his realization of catastrophe, stiffened so violently that he almost crushed the girl in his arms.

"Don't kill—me," Janis managed to utter faintly.

"Aw—I'm sorry. I—I just went off my haid," replied Brazos in a smothered voice, as he released his clasp.

But Janis did not let go her clinging hold of him nor take her head from his breast. "Oh-h! Brazos, a girl in love—even as terribly as—I am—has to breathe."

"Wal, I didn't know yu loved me—turrible."

"I do—I do! I was aching with love—burning with jealousy—dying with fear. But at times I *knew* you loved me."

"My Gawd, how I know it!" exclaimed Brazos huskily, horror-stricken with a sense of his guilt and the exultant madness that enveloped him.

He bent his head over her and again enfolded her slender form, while he gazed unseeingly out into the silver-black shadows of the woods. The white pitiless moon looked down upon him like an accusing eye. The night breeze moaned pitifully in the tips of the pines. Only a soft strain of music in the distance gave that strange solitude reality.

"Darling, this is perfect," said Janis, stirring, and trying to look up at him. "It pays me for my anguish. It sustains me—until the next time. But we mustn't stay longer."

"No," agreed Brazos, and stood like a stone.

She pressed back from his breast to look up. "Oh, Brazos! You're so white and stern! Was it hard to choose between June and me? My poor darling, you could have had *me* for the asking!"

Brazos wrenched his gaze from the shadows to look down upon her, fully conscious now that he was as weak as guilty, that he loved her the same as June, that she had a devastating power he had never felt in the shy sister. And suddenly she manifested it again, flaring up like a flame, to cling with round arms as strong as steel, to tear her fingers through his hair, to lock them behind his head and draw him down to those lips of fire that he would have faced doom to meet.

Brazos surrendered to a moment of transport. Whatever came of this mad folly, he would have that to dream of. Janis was intensely alive. He could feel the bursting swell of her breast, the throb of her heart, the burn of her blood through the skin of her bare arms. He could hear her broken utterances of endearment, low, deep, with a strange rich hoarseness. And he spent all the passion of his lonely unsatisfied heart—the endless hours of longing by day and night in the saddle—the bitter fatality that a fulfillment of love was not for him—in his response to her kisses.

Then it seemed somehow that this ecstasy waved away and she was smoothing his hair.

"I was always crazy to muss your hair like that," she was murmuring, her eyes like dark stars.

"Jan—I've kinda—mussed yu—too," he replied hoarsely.

"If you haven't! Oh, dear, this dress wasn't made for grizzly bears. Come, I'm as bold as a lioness. But I'd just as lief not meet Henry. This was his dance. I saw you on the porch. I sent him after something. But it was *our* dance, Brazos. Now we will pay the piper, come what may!"

All down the lane she held his hand, while he strode fast to keep up with her tripping steps. Even the blazing bonfire did not deter her. Twice she turned to look at him with wonderful eyes, the secret of which was for him alone. The music grew louder. Brazos saw as in a dream the moving figures, pale, unreal, like disembodied spirits.

Then he heard Janis's sweet mocking little laugh: "Henry! how did you ever miss me?"

"I did. But this cowboy didn't," growled Henry, at which Brazos awoke to life and reality.

"Wal, Sisk, what one man misses, another hits," drawled Brazos, caustic in his sudden awakening.

"Never mind, Henry. We will dance this. Adios, Brazos, until—"

And Brazos stood watching in a light that had lost its dim unreality—watching the girl as she glided away with Henry, her lovely face turned, piquant and moon-blanched, lit by great dark alluring eyes. The crowd swallowed them up. And Brazos plodded away, his head bowed, like a man lost on an endless shingle of shore, in the weird pale night, aimless and hopeless.

A voice pierced dimly into Brazos's sleep, stirring old associations so intimately related with dead slumbers and early calls.

"My guard? Awl-l right— A cowboy's life is ha-ard."

"Wake up, Brazos. If I don't miss my guess, yours this evenin' will be harder than hell."

"Huh?"

"It's four o'clock an' you're wanted," said the curt voice.

Brazos rolled over and opened his eyes to see Jack Sain standing beside his bunk, a quite different person from the usual cheerful cowboy.

"Who wants me?"

"June an' Jan. They sent me. They're waitin' for you where the trail turns off the lane into the woods."

"Ahuh. An' yu have a hunch my life is gonna be harder'n hell pronto," drawled Brazos, sliding his long legs out of bed.

"I'll bet you get the spur-rakin' of your ridin' days."

"Boy, yu shore look like life was kinda hard for yu this mawnin'—I mean this evenin' after the dance."

"I'd just as lief be dead," returned Sain hopelessly. Then Brazos took a second look at him, and felt remorse gnaw at his own heart.

"What's yore trouble, cowboy?" asked Brazos kindly.

"You know. It's the same as yours."

"Ump-um. Don't yu get thet idee. Mine is double yores. All the same I can help yu."

"Thanks, Brazos—I just can't help likin' you—though you've ruined my life."

"Turrible extravagant talk, Jack. Yu mean June hasn't been so—so nice to yu since I rode along?"

"Brazos, she al-almost loved me before you came," replied Sain miserably. "Since then she's been— Oh, hell! nice an' kind, yes, but different. It just hurts, Brazos. I'm not sore at you. I think you're the grandest fellow I ever knew. An' even if you wasn't I'd have to feel square toward you because of what you've done for June—an' all the Neeces. It's only—"

"Only what, Jack?"

"I'm afraid to tell you, Brazos, but —but they all say it. An' you're bound to hear it."

"Go ahaid. My gun is way back under my pillow, so I cain't bore yu."

"Brazos, they say you're playin' hell with the twins," replied Sain huskily "—that you're payin' them up for their fun—their lettin' us all take one for the other."

"Wal, who says thet?"

"All the outfit. Even Neece. He told me it served the girls 'good and damn

right.' But, Brazos, I *know* that's Jan's fault. June worships her. She'd give her very soul for Jan."

"Jack, I kinda had thet hunch myself," replied Brazos, pulling on his boots. His mind seemed to scintillate with the sparks of an inspiration Sain had given him. He stood up, reached for his gun belt and buckled it on. Then he stepped to the little mirror, and had a look at his face.

"My Gawd! what a mug! Did yu ever see a pictoor of thet gazabo Lucifer? I shore look like him this mawnin'."

"It's evenin', Brazos. Everybody has been up since noon. Bilyen rode to town, worried about somethin'—an' the girls are waitin' for you."

"Let 'em wait," said Brazos, and he turned piercing eyes upon his friend. "Jack, yu're a good boy. I like yu heaps. An' I'm damn sorry I upset yore courtin'. But thet was only an incident in yore romance. Let me give yu a hunch, boy. Don't be sick an' jealous an' black. Be yore real self to June. Thet girl is gonna rebound into yore arms like a rubber ball off a 'dobe wall."

"Oh, Brazos. Don't lie—don't rave just to cheer me up."

"Keep this under yore sombrero, cowboy. I did give the girls a dose of their own medicine. I shore played a low-down trick on them. Why, Jack, it was apple pie for me to tell them—one from the other. An' I let on I couldn't. Wal, heah's what no one else but yu will ever know—except Neece, an' I give yu leave to tell him. I got burned turrible bad in thet little game of makin' love."

"June an' Jan—*both!*" gasped Jack, suddenly enlightened.

"Boy, yu hit it plumb on the haid."

"Oh, Lord! But, Brazos, damn it, I'm not glad. I couldn't stand your—that you didn't really care!"

"Gosh, Jack, yu're a heartless hombre," drawled Brazos. "Wal, I'll trot along to my little rendezvous."

But Brazos knew in his heart, with grim anguish, that no man ever presented such a false exterior. His mind was set on one thing—to look and act and talk the character the cowboys at Twin Sombreros had given him. To make June and Janis hate him!

He caught sight of them before they saw him, and then his thoughts raced, and his feelings kept pace. They were waiting in a grove of pines off the lane.

"Mawnin', girls—aw, I mean good evenin'," he drawled, as true to his frank careless winning way as ever in his life. "I shore am glad to see yu so—so fresh an' pretty after thet all-night dance."

But his conscience smote him as with a terrific mace. Incredible as it seemed, he recognized instantly which girl was June and which was Janis.

"Brazos, Jan—we have something serious to ask you," said June, sad, searching eyes on his. She was pale, composed, surprisingly strong. Brazos divined he was to learn the depth of her. Janis was white as snow and her eyes were great black baleful orbs of fire. She had no reserve. She was ready to burst into flame.

"Brazos," she whispered hoarsely. "I—I told June."

"Ahuh. I reckon yu girls been comparin' notes— What'd yu tell her, Jan?"

"About last—night—that you begged me—to elope with you—and I promised."

"Wal, June, what'd yu say to thet?"

"Brazos! Oh, it's true—then. I told Jan that I was in love with you—and engaged to marry you."

"What happened then?"

"We had a terrible quarrel."

"Brazos Keene, is she telling the truth?" flashed Janis furiously.

"Shore she is," drawled Brazos. "I'm enjoyin' the honor of bein' engaged to June an' plannin' to elope with yu."

"Oh, you devil. You lying flirt of a conceited cowboy! You ought to–be horsewhipped! Making game of us–making a fool–of *me!* For I–I was in –in earnest–horribly in love with you– Oh, I ha-hate you! The shame of it! You've broken–my heart!"

"Jan, did it ever occur to yu thet yu've broken some hearts yoreself?"

"Don't add insult to injury," she cried passionately.

"Wal, I figured thet yu an' June needed a lesson–a dose of yore own medicine," said Brazos slowly. But he felt June's eyes upon him and inwardly he began to weaken in this preposterous deceit. "This game of yores–bein' one girl when yu air really two girls–thet's shore not fair to us boys. We never could tell yu apart. An' yu built yore house of mirth on thet. Yu were havin' fun at our expense. Yu dressed exactly alike an' talked an' looked an' acted thet way. Yu played tricks on us. I reckon thet would have been all right when yu were kids–but yu're grown girls now–women in face an' form an' feelin', an' most distractin' lovely. An' thet makes yore trick pretty damn low-down, in my way of thinkin'. Every cowboy on this range, an' I'll gamble a lot of older men, air lovesick over yu two. So little Brazos rode along an' thought he'd break up yore game."

"If you hadn't saved Dad–made him happy again–I'd kill you!" burst out Janis in helpless rage.

"Jan, you see," interposed June gravely, her hands going out to her sister. "I always told you it would get us into trouble."

"It has–ruined me," sobbed Janis, covering her face. "June–I'm sorry. But it was such fun–until this devil came. He never played any game–for fun. He was deadly earnest–and he m-made me l-love him so–horribly. I know now–maybe he served me right. But that doesn't help–this–this–"

She left off and suddenly uncovered her convulsed face, to fasten a gaze on Brazos that appeared to blaze through tears.

"You carried your poor joke too far. You're a heartless villain–a shameless trickster. You disgrace the very name of cowboy."

Brazos winced under that last jibe, the justice of which he recognized, and he was fighting to keep up his shallow pretense when June confronted him with soul-searching eyes. She came close. She laid a steady hold on him, looking up with the clearest, the most solemn eyes he had ever met. Their expression changed on the instant. In their amber depths came a shining little glint of woman's divination.

"Brazos Keene, you lie!"

"Aw–June!"

"You're lying. You're trying to save us–to make us despise you. But you can't do it."

Brazos sat down on a log as if his legs had weakened as had his will.

"Shore. I'm–a liar–an' a miserable hombre."

"*Brazos!*" Janis darted to him and knelt, one hand on his shoulder. "What did she mean? What do you mean?"

"Aw, Jan, it's no use. June saw through me. I fell in love with yu both. I cain't tell you apart. I've been honest with June–an' with yu, too. I did

ask her to marry me. An' when—those times I've been alone with yu—I thought *yu* was June! But now I know yu, it doesn't make no difference. I love yu just the same—just as turrible. An' after last night—when yu let yoreself go— Aw! I'm a gone goslin'."

"You loved me—thinking I was June?" she asked, her voice breaking.

"I reckon I did."

"But you love me, too?"

"Yes, I love yu, Jan."

"Just as much as you do June?"

"I cain't tell my love apart any more than I can yu girls."

"But Brazos," cried Janis frantically. "We can't be absolutely the same to you."

"Yes, yu air. Only June makes me happy, quiet, shore of myself—an' yu drive me wild with yore kisses. Jan, I'd go to hell for one of those kisses."

Janis slipped her other arm around Brazos and embraced him passionately, as if she could never let him go. Then she looked up at her sister in anguish. "June, I forgive him. We—*I* am most to blame. But I can't hate him now. I can't bear to let him go—oh, merciful heaven, what *can* I do?"

"Jan, you need not give Brazos up," said June, her voice strong and sweet. "You shall marry him."

Brazos heard aright and he sprang up, almost lifting Janis with him. "What's thet?" he demanded roughly.

"Jan shall have you, Brazos."

He stared at her, only conscious through sight of her drawn face and wonderful eyes that for the first time he was realizing the true June Neece.

"I cain't consent to thet."

"Nor I, June," added Janis. "It wouldn't be fair. To cheat you of everything? No, no! All my life I have let you put me first. I won't do it here. But I'm not big enough to give him to you. We must be brokenhearted together."

"Janis, neither of us needs to be brokenhearted. He shall marry you and we'll all be happy."

"But—but—" faltered Janis.

"What yu got in yore haid, girl?" demanded Brazos sternly, and letting go of Janis he squared toward June, studying her pale face with narrow piercing eyes. She was proof against his scrutiny. She was the strongest of the three.

"Brazos, I'd give my very life to make Jan happy."

"Shore. But it cain't be done."

"Jan shall be your wife, Brazos—and you can have me, too."

Janis leaped to her. "June! I—he—Oh, if it could only be!"

"It can, sister."

Brazos seized her shoulders in rough grasp. He felt the blood rush back to his heart leaving his skin tight and cold.

"What air—yu sayin'?" he demanded huskily.

"I said Jan shall be your wife—and you can have me too. We're twins, you know, almost the same as *one* girl. I'd never marry. I'd always be true to you, Brazos. No one would ever know."

Chapter Fourteen

Brazos Talks—and Shoots

BRAZOS fled precipitately from the little grove of pines, refusing to trust himself to answer June's startling solution to their problem. Hurriedly saddling his horse, he rode into Las Animas. He felt a need to be away from Twin Sombreros in order to think this thing through.

At Pedro's corrals, he learned that there had been a shooting in town earlier in the day, but the Mexican did not know who had been involved.

Brazos started down the street toward Mexican Joe's, but had gone hardly half a block when he met Inskip. There was something in the Texan's eyes that gripped Brazos.

"Yu're lookin' for Knight?" Inskip asked abruptly.

"No. Not particular just this minute."

"Then yu haven't heahed?"

"Inskip, fact is I haven't heahed nothin' but thet waltzy music oot at Twin Sombreros."

"Knight shot Hank Bilyen this mawnin'."

"Aw!" A rending pang in Brazos yielded to leaping fire. "Hank! Daid?"

"No. Pretty close call, though. Doc says Hank ain't in danger."

"Wal, thet's a relief. Shore was sweatin' cold— This hombre Knight? He shot Surface, yu recollect— What was it all aboot?"

"Hank ain't tellin'. But Knight has been roarin' aboot town. He was drunk when he did the shootin', so I heahed."

"Drunk! What'n hell was Hank doin' all the time?"

"He wasn't packin' no gun."

"Ahuh. I'll shore cuss him. An' what's this gunslinger Knight roarin' aboot?"

"Wal, it sobered him, I reckon. But he's mad or pretendin' to be. Tellin' everywhere he thought Bilyen had a gun an' was drawin' it—thet he told Bilyen he was goin' to hold Neece for cattle Surface owed him—thet Bilyen began to curse an' threaten."

"Ahuh. An' what's the talk aboot town?"

"Wal, there's not much talkin', but a lot of lookin'. What I heahed, though, was daid agin Knight. He's not liked by the substantial residents of Las Animas, thet's shore."

"Any talk connectin' Knight with Bodkin?"

"Not thet I heahed. But they're thick as hops, Brazos. Take it from me."

"Bodkin is the nigger in the woodpile. Inskip, how yu reckon thet crook has lasted so long with Texans?"

"Meanin' me an' yu an' Kiskadden? Wal, Gawd only knows how he's lasted with yu. But Kis an' I have responsibilities—business an' family. Then Bodkin had a strong followin', for a while, long enough to elect him. Sooner or later everybody heah in Las Animas will know he's crookeder than a rail fence, same as we know now."

"Where is Hank?" queried Brazos, his brow knit heavily.

"At Gage's. I'll go with yu."

"Reckon yu'd better locate Knight for me."

"No need. He's been walkin' the streets. In stores an' oot. Shy of saloons. All yu got to do is wait somewhere 'till he comes along."

Brazos found his friend Bilyen lying on an improvised bed of blankets on the floor of a room back of Gage's store.

The Texan's rugged visage lacked color and was clammy.

"Would yu men mind leavin' us alone with Bilyen?" queried Brazos of the group present. They left and Brazos knelt by the prostrate man.

"Wal, old-timer, how yu makin' oot?" he drawled, with deep feeling.

"Howdy, Brazos. I been wonderin' when yu'd roll in. Me? What's a gunshot to a Texan? I'm all right. I ducked when he shot, or he'd killed me shore. If ever I seen red murder in a man's eyes it was Knight's. An' I dropped like I was bored plumb center."

"Ahuh. Yu're pretty smart when yore hawss has got oot of the barn. Let me see— Right side—Hank, don't tell me it's low down."

"Right under my collarbone an' clear through. Sorer than a stubbed toe! But it's nothin' atall, Brazos. I wouldn't lie to yu, boy."

"Spit any blood?"

"Nary a drop. Cowboy, I shore won't rest or sleep till yu shoot the gizzards oot of thet black buzzard."

"Good. If yu talk short an' sweet I reckon yu can have a sleep in less'n two wags of a lamb's tail— What was it aboot?"

"Nothin' I said or did. Knight braced me. Said he was demandin' two thousand haid of yearlin's—from Neece through me. I gave him the laugh till I seen thet red light come to his eye. Then if I'd only had a gun!"

"Did yu say anythin'?"

"I cussed him right pert."

"Anythin' more than cussin'?"

"Wal, I was riled. An' before I seen he meant murder I told him to lay off Neece or he'd have yu to deal with. At thet he gave me the hawss laugh. Said he an' Bodkin (he's not smart atall, Brazos. He gave Bodkin away) kowed yore hands was tied. Thet yore gunnin' for sheriffs was over!"

"An' what did yu say to thet?"

"I told him we knowed he an' Bodkin was in cahoots—thet *yu* knowed he was the rustler Brad yu heahed with Bodkin thet night at Hailey's. Brazos, it was a random shot, but it shore went home. I jest guessed it—an' thet crack of mine almost settled my hash. For murder leaped to Knight's eyes. I seen it an' shet up pronto. But I was too late. When he drew I ducked."

"So— I'll shore know if he's thet Brad the instant I heah his voice. Not thet it matters. But it sort of dovetails in. An' thet's what I got on Bodkin."

"Brazos, this man Brad must have ruled Surface an' Bodkin both. He struck me strong, cunnin', vicious. But he's no gunman. I could have shot him three times runnin'— But Bodkin. I told yu before to lay off him."

Inskip interposed here: "Right, Bilyen. Unless Brazos has proof—material proof, or a witness, he'd better let Bodkin alone. For he has been elected sheriff by the citizens of this county. He's an officer of law in this territory."

"It cain't be done," drawled Brazos.

"Have you anythin' on Bodkin thet'd clear yu in court?"

"I know him."

"But your word only is not enough, Brazos," declared Inskip impressively.

"Pard, Inskip is talkin' sense," added Bilyen earnestly. "Listen, cowboy. If—if things oot at Twin Sombreros air the way they seemed to Neece an' me—an' the way we hoped—for Gawd's sake, leave Bodkin alone. He'll hang himself pronto."

"It just cain't be done. I see thet now," replied Brazos strangely.

"Boy, think of June—if it *is* June," importuned Hank.

"I am thinkin' of June—an' Jan, too," responded Brazos as he pressed a strong hand upon Bilyen's. And Brazos knew, if Hank did not, that gesture was one of affection and farewell. "So long, yu Texans."

Brazos strode out, leaving Inskip there. He passed the group of men, and went through the store to halt to one side of the open door. He wanted another moment to think before he gave all consciousness to a deadly set of faculties.

All in an instant, kneeling there beside his friend, Brazos had received a revealing illumination. By its light he saw the unmistakable, the inevitable part left for him to play. A bitterness, a sadness, and yet an ecstasy waved through his soul as he accepted the gauge. It had all been plotted out beforehand for him. He had had his paradise and he had left it fine and pure, the better for his blunder, his love, his renunciation. The truth had been long hidden. He was Brazos Keene. He never could be anyone else but Brazos Keene. And he strode out that open door Brazos Keene again, cold and ruthless, with all his peculiar gifts magnified.

Brazos had in mind an image of this man Brad—tall, heavy, dark of face with beady black eyes—black garb—forceful presence. He was not the first man Brazos had tracked without ever having seen him in the flesh. It was possible for him to be mistaken in a description, but never in a voice. He had heard Brad talk.

The sidewalks were deserted. A farm wagon, drawn by big horses, appeared at the end of the street, raising slow clouds of dust. At the opposite end two horsemen rode out of town. The stillness seemed unusually pronounced, oppressive, full of suspense. But Brazos knew his mood—how it magnified his senses.

Halfway between Hall's saloon and the Happy Days there stood an unoccupied adobe structure, one of the old landmarks of Las Animas, yellow and crumbling with age. Brazos took his station there in the doorway, from which he could not readily be seen except from a point almost directly opposite. Answering to Inskip's suggestion, he meant to wait there a little while.

So Brazos waited with hawk eyes alert, wholly now in the grip of this strange mood that had become a part of him—of faculties which made him so dangerous. He was conscious of enhanced physical activity, a strain, a gathering of nerve forces, of augmented heartbeats and throbbing pulse, of his tight cool skin. In fact, except for his keen thought and cold resolve, he was a tiger in ambush.

He did not have long to wait for the quiet of Las Animas to be broken. There came a movement of vehicles up and down the street, and of boot-thumping, spur-jangling pedestrians along the sidewalk. Two cowboys went by with their awkward gait and they saw Brazos, started to check their talk, and when Brazos made a slight gesture they hurried on whispering, their heads together. It would not be long from that moment when a wave of expectancy would run along this street.

Brazos decided to forestall that, and he was about to start out when a tall man emerged from Hall's. He answered to the description Brazos had in mind as fitting Knight. Three men followed him out of the saloon. They talked. And Brazos detected a nervous excitement in the way they stood and spoke.

Then Knight turned his dark face in Brazos's direction. One of his comrades accompanied him, a lean man apparently used to the saddle. He was in his shirt sleeves and his vest was open. Knight wore a long black frock coat. It bulged over his right hip. Brazos smiled scornfully at the folly and blind arrogance of a man who packed his gun like that. The lean man took no such chances.

They came on. It looked to Brazos as if Knight was on parade for the benefit of Las Animas. The other man showed nothing of such a mien. He would bear watching.

As they came on, Brazos made his final estimate of Knight. In another moment he stepped out to confront them.

"Howdy, Brad," he drawled.

If that name did not belong to this man, it certainly had power to halt him with a stiffening jerk.

"My name's—Knight," he rasped out.

"Aw; hell!" ejaculated Brazos in cold derision. The voice was the one he expected.

"Who are you?" demanded the other suddenly.

"Wal, if yu don't know now, yu haven't got a long time to get acquainted."

The lean man, staring hard at Brazos, said quietly, "It's Brazos Keene."

"Good guess, stranger. Slope damn pronto or I'll bore yu," returned Brazos, just as quietly.

The man wheeled as on a pivot and his boots rang on the hard sidewalk.

"Wal, Mr. Knight, yu've met up with Brazos Keene at last."

"What of that?" retorted Knight.

"I cain't say for yu, but I can guess tolerable wal what of it for me."

"You're this Texas cowboy I hear so much about?"

"How much do yu heah?"

"I'm fed up on it."

"Ahuh. Wal, yu kinda look like it disagreed with yu. Bad stomach, I reckon—an' yu don't strike me very healthy in yore mind," drawled Brazos sarcastically.

"Is that so?" snapped Knight, his queer voice whistling.

"Shore. Cause if yu were very bright yu'd savvy what yu're up against."

"Brazos Keene, ah? Ha! Ha! It doesn't impress me, you bragging cowpuncher."

"Wal, it's agonna, Brad."

"Damn you! My name's Knight," burst out the other fiercely.

Brazos saw the leap of thought in those beady black eyes. It was a steely red glint, a compass needle wavering and fixing—the intent to kill. Brad would attempt to draw on him, Brazos knew, and he felt deep amazement at this man's ignorance of real gunmen.

"Wal, it's Brad too."

"Who told you that?"

"Nobody. I just heahed Bodkin an' thet other hombre call yu Brad."

"When and where?" queried Brad heatedly, but he had begun to whiten.

"Thet night at Hailey's. Just after the midnight train had pulled in from the East. I was in the next room an' had a hole cut in the wall."

"You meddling cowhand!"

"Shore. Brad, I shore got a hand to draw to—an' I got one to draw *with!*"

Knight vibrated to that. He blazed with passion. It was fury, not fear, that dominated him.

"An' I'm packin' a gun, too! Which is what yu knew my Texas pard, Bilyen, wasn't."

"To hell with you Texans!"

"Ump-umm. Texans don't go to hell

for depletin' the West of such two-bit hombres as yu. Brad, yu an' Bodkin an' Surface—all yore ilk air nothin' but a lot of blood-suckin' cattle ticks."

Knight appeared to be beyond speech, clamped in his rage, slowly awakening to the inevitableness of something sinister that loomed like a specter. Still he had no fear. But it was rage, not nerve.

"Why, man alive!" went on Brazos in his cold taunting voice of absolute assurance. "I've met up with some real men in my day. Yu're nothin' but a low-down coward that shoots unarmed men—"

With a grating curse Knight jerked for his gun.

Brazos stepped through the drifting pall of smoke to look down upon the fallen man. But he was too late to see Brad die. The rustler boss lay on his back, his right arm pinned under him, clutching his half-drawn gun, his visage distorted in its convulsive change from life to death. And at that instant his sombrero, which had rolled on its rim off the sidewalk, tilted and flopped to a standstill.

It was not until then that the blood lust in Brazos, the passion to slay, his implacable hatred of these parasites of the cattle range, all of which had been developed by circumstances over which Brazos had no control, leaped out of his controlling restraint to make him terrible.

He slipped a fresh cartridge into the one empty chamber of his still smoking gun. A crowd blocked the sidewalk in front of Hall's. Across the street white faces appeared at doors and windows. A noise, like a single expelled breath, arose among the men outside, to augment and swell into voices. It expressed release of suspense, a tragedy enacted.

"Atta boy, Brazos!" yelled a lout at the back in hoarse venting of his passion, and a laugh, nervous, not mirthful, ran through the crowd.

Sheathing his gun, Brazos whirled on his heel to stride rapidly in the direction of the sheriff's office.

It was locked. The dispenser of Las Animas justice wasted little of his valuable time there. Brazos burst into three places before someone told him where to locate Bodkin.

"Seen him go in Twin Sombreros restaurant," called out this individual.

Brazos laughed. Of all places for Bodkin to be cornered by Brazos Keene! There was a fate that waited upon evil men. Bodkin, on the hour that his ally Knight had tried to murder Bilyen, and himself lay dead in the street, should have been in his office surrounded by his deputies and guns, or in the saloon where he drank and gambled and planned with members of his secret contingent. It boded ill for him that he was entertaining visitors from Denver and businessmen he desired to impress.

Brazos opened the door of the restaurant, slipped in, then slammed it behind him. This eating-house of the Neece twins was full of customers. On the right side, facing the street from which Brazos had entered, several of the small tables had been placed together, round which sat ten or a dozen men. Brazos's lightning eye had scanned them to locate his victim.

"*Everybody set tight!*" yelled Brazos.

His appearance had as much to do with the sudden petrified silence of those present as had his stentorian voice. He surveyed the men at table.

Miller he recognized. His passion was such that even the presence of the banker Henderson among them occasioned him no surprise. Several other faces were familiar, evidently belonging to new businessmen of Las Animas. The rest were strangers.

"Haw! Haw! Haw!" laughed Brazos lustily, wild as a maniac. But a keen observer would have noted that the cowboy swerved not the slightest hair from his slight crouch—that his hands were low and the right spread a little from his body. Far removed indeed was Brazos from irrationality. He was a death-dealing machine, as impersonal as a lightning stroke. "Haw! Haw! Funny aboot findin' yu heah, Bodkin!"

The guests at that table rose so hurriedly that half their chairs turned over. They split, some on each side, leaving Bodkin alone at the head, his ox eyes rolling at Brazos, his leather visage losing its swarthy line.

"Keene, this hyar's an intrusion—insult to my guests. I—"

"Haw! Haw! Yore guests, huh? Wal, they must be crooked as yu or the damnedest fools in Colorado."

"Drunk again! Same old Keene! You get out or I'll clap you in jail."

Brazos spat like a cat. "Jail? By Gawd, yu make me remember I got thet on yu too! Wal, Bodkin, my rustlin' sheriff, yu'll never clap me in jail again—or any other cowboy!"

Still it did not quite dawn upon Bodkin that he was in for more than abuse at the hands of Brazos Keene. There must have been a very strong conviction locked in his dense mind—no doubt the gossip that if Brazos was to marry into the Neece family his gun-throwing days were over in Colorado.

"Get out, Keene. You're drunk an' you're blowin' off. Why do you pick on me?"

"Wal, I didn't feel full of talk when I busted in heah," drawled Brazos bitingly. "But seein' yu all dressed up, throwin' all this bluff, I just feel like crowin'."

"Well, you can go out in the pasture an' crow," replied Bodkin angrily. "Let me alone. You can't want anythin' of me."

"Hell I cain't!"

There ensued a pause of suspense, fraught with the significance of the cowboy's icy voice.

"What you want—then?" demanded Bodkin hoarsely.

"Wal, first off I wanted to tell yu, Bodkin," drawled Brazos with irritating slowness. He paused. Then he leaned a little more, like an eagle about to strike, to launch words swift as bullets. "Yore pard Brad is layin' oot there in the street daid!"

"Brad?" Bodkin choked out the name.

"Yes. Brad. He calls himself Knight. He's yore new man. I savvy thet empty chair I seen heah next yu was for him. Wal, he couldn't set in yore little game. He's daid!"

"Who shot him?"

"Some hombre from Texas."

"You!"

"Bodkin, yu're so good a guesser maybe yu can guess some more."

"Well, that's no great concern of mine," returned Bodkin harshly. "You're one of these even-break gunmen, so I can't arrest you. I knew him as Knight. Now get out—"

"Aw, Bodkin, yu're all lie," flung out Brazos, and in two long strides he reached the table. He lifted his boot against it and shoved powerfully. The laden tables slid and tumbled with a

crash, overturning Bodkin and half covering his burly form.

"Come up with yore gun!" ordered Brazos.

Bodkin floundered to his feet and would have made a ludicrous figure but for a stark and ghastly terror that was etched on his face. He made no move for his gun, which swung free without coat to hamper it.

"I'm not fightin' you—gun slinger," he panted.

"Yes, yu air—or be the first man I ever bored without it."

"Let me by. If you're spoilin' for a fight I'll find men—"

"Bah, yu chicken-hearted four-flush! Cain't yu make no better stand before yore guests? Cain't yu die game?"

"Brazos Keene, I'll not add another notch to your gun handle."

"Wal, I'll break my rule an' cut just one notch for yu, Bodkin. An' wherever I ride I'll show it an' say thet's for the yellowest, dirtiest skunk I ever shot."

"I tell you I won't draw," shouted Bodkin, desperate in his fear.

Brazos's gun twinkled blue. *Bang!* Bodkin screamed like a horse in agony. His leg gave way under him and he would have fallen but for the chair he seized. Brazos's bullet had penetrated the calf of his leg.

"Air yu gonna take it by inches?" demanded the cowboy.

Bodkin gazed balefully, with wobbling jaw. Horribly plain his love of life, his fear of death! And still it eluded him—the destroying truth of this cowboy.

"Bodkin, yore game is up. Yu've dealt yore last hand at cairds. Yore lyin', cheatin', stealin' days air over. Yore murderin' days air over. For *yu* was Surface's tool in Allen Neece's murder. Yu tried the same deal when yu sent Bard Syvertsen an' his girl Bess to murder me. Yu're a menace to this range. These Las Animas fools who elected yu sheriff air crazy or crooked."

"You're the crazy—one," gasped Bodkin.

"Listen man. Cain't yu see things? I could kill yu on a personal grudge. But I'm gonna kill yu for better reasons."

"Keene, you can't prove—you have no case—"

"Hell! Heah's one yu cain't deny. I was in the room next to yore's at Hailey's. I had a hole cut in the wall. I heahed yu come in at midnight, with two men. One of them this Brad hombre I just shot. An' I heahed yu talk. About Brad's failure to get the gunman, Panhandle Ruckfall, to come heah to kill me. Aboot the gold Syvertsen stole from Neece an' gave to Surface. Aha! yore memory is comin' to, Bodkin, old-timer! Aboot how yu reckoned yu would hang on heah an' get elected sheriff. An' last, how the third man of yu three thet night—the one whose name I never heahed—how *he* said the cattlemen on this range was wakin' up an' he was gonna slope."

Damning guilt worked upon the lessening fear and agony in Bodkin's visage.

"Now will yu go for yore gun?" added Brazos sardonically.

"No—you—hydrophobia-bitten cowhand!"

Crash! Brazos shot the other leg out from under Bodkin. Still the sheriff did not fall, nor this time did he scream out. He sagged a little, until his knee on the chair upheld him. Then the horrid expression faded, smoothed out of his face, and into it came a vestige of the realization of death and a dark de-

sire to take his merciless adversary with him. He let go of the chair with his right hand and drew his gun.

Brazos let him swing it upward. Then he leaped aside and shot. Bodkin's gun boomed so close afterward that the two shots seemed simultaneous. But Bodkin's bullet crashed through the window and Brazos's reached its mark. Bodkin slumped over the chair, his arms hanging, his head drooping, and on the instant his grip on his gun loosened to let it clatter on the floor.

Then the cowboy faced the ill-assorted group of men who had assembled there as Bodkin's guests. There was not the sign of a movement among them. They stood as if petrified.

"Henderson, yu're in bad company," rang out Brazos, "an' no matter what yore excuse, it'll be remembered in Las Animas. Miller, I'm brandin' yu as hand an' glove with this Surface ootfit. Yu businessmen an' yu strangers all know Bodkin now for what he was. An' I reckon thet'll be aboot all for Brazos Keene in Colorado."

Chapter Fifteen

Proof Positive

HE RODE away from Las Animas at dawn as the sun was reddening the gray landscape, without ever once looking back, as he had done so often in his tumultuous life on the range.

His heading for the south, however, with the lean eager nose of his horse Bay turned toward Texas, had an air of finality. Thirst for adventure and even for romance had been effectually killed. As Brazos took to the well-worn cattle trail, he felt sick and old and unhappy. He reflected that he would recover from the former, which was mostly revulsion at the shedding of blood, but he doubted that he would ever be young or happy again.

For long days he rode alone, shunning the cow camps, going around several little towns, camping at water holes and living upon the food he had packed. He made a gloomy and strange traveler. The gray miles filed past and every one of them seemed a dropped fetter. And in due course the bitter dregs of his last killing orgy wore out of his stomach. But the sense of loss still pressed heavily upon him. He forgot that it had been wise for him to ride away from the scene that had outlawed him, however unjust the law was, and despite the multitude of friends he had left behind.

The day came when Brazos's trail led to the sleepy village of Hooker, where he purchased a blanket and as much food supply as Bay could carry. Once over the line into the Panhandle, towns would be few and far between. When he rode across the Texas line it seemed as definite a break as riding out of Las Animas. He was in his beloved Texas land. Yet how he had loved Colorado!

Thereafter travel became leisurely. There was now no need of hurry, if there had ever been, and he could think of Bay and be easy on the great horse.

Brazos came at length to Doan's Crossing. He was amazed to find himself so far down in Texas, arriving at one of the famous old posts of the frontier. Hungry and travel-stained, with Bay gone lame and needing rest, Brazos was forced to a halt.

"Jest as wal," he soliloquized. "Reckon I cain't be a lone wolf forever. I gotta live. A little more of this lone prairie will make me dotty."

Turning away from the great trail at the crossing, Brazos rode toward the post. It stood back from the river and appeared different. Then he saw that Doan's Crossing had grown to be a settlement. The huge rambling trading-post, its adobe walls red in the westering sun, appeared the same as the picture in his memory. But it fronted on the corner of a wide street that stretched far between gray flat houses and red-walled buildings. Back from this typical Western street, full of dust and vehicles and houses, scattered cottages and shacks and tents grew up to the rise of the gray prairie.

"Wal, doggone me!" ejaculated Brazos mildly. "Tom Doan has shore thrown up a metropolis."

If there were a trail herd in from the south it would account for the saddle horses standing bridles down, and the lounging riders, and the sloe-eyed swarthy Indians, but hardly for the life and bustle of that street. As Brazos slid wearily out of his saddle a lanky young Texan met him with a keen gaze.

"Howdy, rider. Air you stayin' over?"

"Howdy, young feller. I reckon. My hawss is lame. Will you put him up and look after him?"

"Yu bet," replied the lad, taking the bridle.

"Tom Doan heah yet?"

"Shore, Tom's heah, big as life. Yu been heah before?"

"Say, Tex, this old 'dobe post wouldn't be heah now but for me," drawled Brazos as he untied his coat and saddlebags.

"Wal, you don't say?" queried the lad, his keen blue eyes taking Brazos in with Texas perspicuity. "Mister, there's Doan comin' oot."

Brazos's glance lighted upon a tall Texan approaching. Same old Tom Doan! Brazos could have picked him out of a hundred Texans, though they all were sandy-haired, sallow-faced, with slits of gray fire for eyes. Brazos was used to scrutiny and he met it here in full measure. It gave him the first quick beat of pulse for days. He was home in Texas all right.

"Howdy, stranger. Git down an' come in," was the greeting. "Hevn't I seen you before?"

"Tom, I reckon I'm starved and thin and black with this heah dust and beard. But it's a downright insult for you not to know me," drawled Brazos.

Doan straightened up from his close scrutiny. His still lined visage broke into a broad smile.

"Wal, talk of the devil an' heah he is! Brazos Keene!"

"Yep, it's Keene all right, only not the boy you used to know. And how air

you, Tom?"

The warm smile, the glad flash of Texas eyes, the hard grip, and the hand on his shoulder thrilled some of the cold weariness out of Brazos.

"I reckon I'm downright glad to see yu, Tom," he responded hoarsely.

"Say, yu're spittin' cotton. Come in, boy, an' hev a drink."

"Wal, I need one, Tom. But not red likker."

Doan led Brazos through a lane of curious riders, into the post. The huge interior, its adobe walls decorated with Indian designs and ornaments, the colored blankets and utensils hanging from the rafters, the counters laden with merchandise, and the shelves packed with a miscellaneous collection of stores, and especially the great open fireplace at the end—all these appeared just the same as if he had seen them yesterday. But there was a wide door that Brazos did not remember. It led into a saloon full of smoke and noise. Dusty-booted and shirt-sleeved Westerners stood at a long bar; Indians in buckskin lounged back along the wall; gamblers sat intent at their tables.

"Tom, what the hell has come off about heah?" asked Brazos after he had quenched his thirst.

"Brazos, we've growed up. Doan's Crossing is a town," replied the host proudly.

"Hell, Tom, I ain't blind. But how come? There never was nothin' heah. Wal, nothin' but buffalo, Injuns, and trail-herd rustlers."

Doan laughed. "So we used to think, cowboy. But we was blind. There's rich land heah. Lots of farms. Plenty ranches. Fine grass an' water. We've got a growin' town. A dozen stores an' more, too many saloons, a school an' a church an' a doctor. I've added a hotel to my post. Turnin' 'em away some days. Two stages a week, herds still trailin' north, travel heavy. Aw, Doan's Crossin' is boomin'."

"Wal, doggone! I'm shore glad, Tom. But who ever would have reckoned on it?"

"I did for one, Brazos. Where yu headin'?"

"West of the Pecos," replied Keene ponderingly, his gaze averted.

"Aw! Don't tell me yu are on the dodge, Brazos?"

"Not atall. I reckon I did get in bad up Colorado way. But thet county I cleaned up will be so glad about it they'd fire any sheriff who put oot strings for me."

"Ah-huh. Wal, I hain't heerd nothin' an' I ain't askin'."

"Good. Tom, I want a room and hot water. Last time I was heah I slept on the counter oot there. Recollect thet?"

"I shore do. An' you didn't need no bath, 'cause yu an' Herb Ellerslie got piled off in the river."

"Gosh! Tom, yu do remember heaps. Did I by any chance owe you some money?"

"Nope. Anyway thet's too long ago to remember."

"Tom, yu're a liar. What become of Herb Ellerslie?"

"Shot, Brazos. Shot at Dodge by a gambler named Cardigan."

"Aw, no! I'm sorry. Herb and I were pretty thick on the trail. Cardigan? I'll remember thet name. How aboot Wess Tanner?"

"Jest fine. Wess drove through—let's see—along in August. He raved aboot one of them electric storms. Come to think of it, Wess will be along any day now."

"Wouldn't I like to see Wess!" ejaculated Brazos dreamily, following his

host out of the saloon into a long corridor.

The whitewashed walls were colorful with Indian blankets, as was also the earthen floor. There were windows on one side and doors on the other. Doan halted at the end of the corridor, which apparently opened into a green and flowery patio. Brazos heard the tinkle of running water. He was ushered into a room that spoke eloquently of the advance Doan's Crossing had made toward civilization.

"Doggone! Tom, this heah is mighty stylish for me. Wonder if I can sleep in thet bed."

"Wal, you look like you needed to," replied Doan with a laugh. "I'll send some hot water. You got about a half hour before supper."

Brazos laid off his sombrero, his gun, spurs and chaps. Then he opened his saddlebags to take out his last clean shirt, scarf and socks, and also his shaving outfit.

"Heigho!" he sighed, and sat down on the bed. "Doan's Crossing—Jesse Chisholm's Trail—and I'm a broken old man!"

A Mexican lad brought a bucket of hot water and towels. Then Brazos indulged in the luxury of a bath, a shave, and some clean clothes. He was scrutinizing his lean brown face in the mirror, shaking his head dubiously, when the supper bell rang. Brazos did not forget to strap on his gun belt. Then he went out.

He had to be directed to the dining-room, and found a dozen or more men ahead of him. Most of them were merry riders. Finding an empty seat, Brazos stepped across the bench and sat down. The fellow next to him on the right was friendly, though not curious. Still Brazos found himself the cynosure of all eyes. That Doan had mentioned his name seemed evident.

A middle-aged man, surely a rancher, sitting at Brazos's left, made himself agreeable. But presently Brazos discovered that he was a starved wolf, and that the meal was sumptuous. He ate until he felt ashamed of himself, and was the last to leave the table.

He went to bed. But tired as he was, he could not sleep. The bed felt too soft, too comfortable. He lay awake, thinking. It was as dark as pitch in his room. Only a hum of noises penetrated the thick walls. And June and Jan Neece filled his mind.

In the dead of night in the blackness of his room at Doan's post, hundreds of miles from the scene of his downfall, he at last saw clearly. All the time, it had been June, and June alone. He had worshiped her, and worshiped her still. At the very onset both girls had won his sympathy, his championship. But it had been June who had uplifted and inspired him, called so deeply and poignantly to the finer side of him, that he had never known really existed. He had thought of June as a girl to work for, to change his nature, to make a home for him and be the mother of his children. All dream! but he saw through it clearly now.

Sleep came very late to Brazos that night. He was awakened from a dead slumber of exhaustion by a pounding on his door. He sat up rubbing his eyes.

"Hey, Mister Keene, air yu daid?" called a voice Brazos recognized as belonging to the Texas lad.

"Mawnin', Tex. No I ain't daid yet. What's the row aboot?"

"I been tryin' to wake you."

"Say, Kid, don't tell me you called me more'n once."

"I have, though."

"What time of day is it?"

"Long after midday. I reckon two o'clock."

"Wal, what's the idee? Injuns or fire?"

"Wuss, for *yu*, Mister Brazos."

"Hell you say! Look heah, Tex, I'm liable to bounce somethin' off yore haid. What you mean—wuss?"

"I—yu—fact is, Brazos, the Dodge City stage rolled in—with an'—some old friends of yores rode in with it." The lad's voice betrayed excitement if not confusion.

"Friends?" flashed Brazos, his blood quickening.

"Tanner an' some of his riders. I heerd Doan tell him to come wake yu up. An' Wess said, 'Me wake Brazos Keene? Mebbe out on the trail, but not heah. Ump-umm!' They was afraid to wake you, Brazos. An' I wasn't so damn happy about it, nuther. Yu see—"

"What'n hell you all think—thet I ain't human?" yelled Brazos as he leaped out of bed. "Tell Wess I'll be there in a jiffy. Rustle, you towhaid."

Brazos laughed at the quick footfalls of the lad fading down the corridor. He washed and dressed as swiftly as if this summons had been a trail call. Warm thoughts attended his actions. He wagered that he would be as glad to see Wess Tanner as Wess— Afraid to wake him? That was a good one. The damned old maverick hunter!

Brazos buckled on his gun belt and strode out into the corridor. He halted at the door of the saloon. There were a dozen or more men at the bar, all strange to see, facing the corridor entrance. All unknown to Brazos, he noted at a glance, but that keen glance registered also that they knew him and looked uneasy. Brazos swore under his breath and strode grimly forward into the trading-post.

A hubbub of voices stilled as he entered. That also stilled Brazos's pleasant sensations. What was amiss? Even if he was Brazos Keene— Indians and riders grouped around the wide door. Outside there appeared to be a crowd.

At the far and lighter end of the big post Doan appeared to have stopped waiting on a customer. Brazos saw him jerk a thumb toward the entrance, and following that cue Brazos espied half a dozen riders, standing a little to the left of a tall blond fellow, lean and intent of face, with eyes like daggers. Brazos recognized Wess Tanner and saw him suddenly jerk as if frozen blood had sustained a hot release. One other of the riders Brazos recognized in that quick glance. They all appeared under a restraint. It irritated Brazos. Why should friends act like strangers when he stalked in? That was one bitter price Brazos Keene had to pay. But he shook it off and advanced. When he reached Tanner only genuine gladness possessed him.

"*Wess!* You lean hungry-lookin' old trail driver!" burst out Brazos. "My Gawd, I'm shore glad to see you!"

"*Pard!* You damned ole brown-skinned *vaquero!*" replied Tanner unsteadily, as he met that proffered hand. "Brazos—I never expected to see this day. An' am I happy?"

They clasped hands and locked glances. It was a meeting between tried and true Texans who had slept and fought and toiled together through unforgettable days. Whatever had made Tanner strange and backward vanished the instant Brazos faced him.

"Brazos—meet my ootfit," said Tanner presently. "Yu ought to remember Sam heah."

"Sam Jenkins. I shore do. Howdy,

Sam," replied Brazos, offering his hand to the sleek, dark Jenkins. "It shore is good to meet you again. Can you palm aces like you used to and sing the herd quiet?"

"Howdy—Brazos," replied Jenkins, warming brightly. "Darn glad to see you. Shore I can do them same old tricks."

Brazos was introduced to the other riders, most of them striplings such as he had been when he first started herd driving. Obviously they were overcome at this meeting, and though pleased and excited, they did not succeed in throwing off the restraint.

"Wal, Wess, I reckon you're ridin' back to Santone for the winter. No more trail drivin' this year?"

"Not till spring, Brazos. An' mebbe not then. Pard, I shore have the grandest ranch bargain there is in all Texas. If I can only raise the backin'!"

"Same old Wess. Always dreamin' of thet grand ranch. I shore want to heah about it. Reckon you'll lay over heah today?"

"We ain't in any hurry, Brazos."

"I'd kinda like to ride south with you, for a while. It's been lonely."

Tanner gave him a keen, kindly glance that baffled Brazos. He expected a warm response to his suggestion that he accompany Tanner and his boys down the Old Trail, and as that was not instantly forthcoming Brazos sustained a little shock of surprise and disappointment.

"Don't be hurt, pard. It ain't likely you'll want to ride with us. But I'd shore like thet— Brazos, come aside over heah. I've news for yu. I'm scared stiff, yet—"

Wess led Brazos to a corner beside a window and faced him there hopefully yet apprehensively, with a pale face full of suppressed agitation that nonplussed Brazos and gave rise again to his former irritation.

"Scared stiff, you?" he queried darkly, almost bitterly. "Wess, I know I'm an ootlaw—an' unfairly, by Gawd—but you, my old pard, who wouldn't have thet blond scalp but for me—"

"Shet up, you fire-eater," interposed Wess. "I couldn't be no more ashamed of yu, Brazos Keene, than of my own brother."

"Sorry, old-timer. Reckon I'm kinda testy. What's on yore mind?"

Manifestly Wess labored under some stress that rendered liberation extremely difficult. He lit a cigarette with visibly unsteady fingers and he swallowed a lump in his throat. But the paleness under his tan had begun to tinge with red.

"Hell, man!" exploded Brazos. "You didn't use to be so damn squeamish—You've heahed about thet little Las Animas mess."

"Shore, Brazos—shore," agreed Wess hurriedly. "Only it didn't seem little to me. Fact is—it was big—big as Texas."

"Yeah? An' what of it?" rasped Brazos.

"Wal, for one thing Dodge City took it fine. The mayor hisself said to me, 'Wess, thet's the sheriff for Dodge when we need another!' "

"Hell he did? Kind of a compliment, at thet."

"Mebbe you shouldn't have rode away from Las Animas so quick."

"I reckon you think I should have got up a party and swelled around town," said Brazos sarcastically.

"Nope, not jest thet, though the deal shore called for some redeye. Where'd yu stop an' soak up a load of likker?"

"Wess, I haven't taken one dod-blast-

ed drink," declared Brazos.

"Thet settles it. Yu air crazy. I been afraid of it ever since—since—"

"Since what, you tongue-tied hombre? I'm gonna get sore pretty pronto."

"Brazos, for the life of me I cain't see why. If I was in yore boots I'd be so dod-blasted happy—"

"You been afraid since what? Since what?" flashed Brazos, grasping Wess's wrist with fingers of steel. There was something wrong about this old friend—something that had to be solved.

"Wal, then, old pard—since—since Miss Neece braced me on the street in Dodge."

"*What?* Miss Neece?" Brazos's voice sounded faint in his thrumming ears. His hand fell away from Wess.

"Shore. Yore fiancée," replied Wess. "Pard, if I'd never heerd of yu I'd have been stricken by sight of thet lovely gurl."

"My—my fiancée? How'd you know—thet?"

"She told me."

"Good Gawd! Wess, wasn't she ashamed of thet?"

"Ha! Ha! I should smile she wasn't."

"Aw! But what for? How come? Was she visitin' Dodge with her dad or friends—and heahed you might know me?"

"No, she shore wasn't visitin' an' as for her dad—wal, never mind about him. Miss Neece was hot on yore trail, Brazos."

At that Brazos began to shake. What was this? His mind began to whirl. "Hot on my—trail?" he echoed in a whisper.

"I said hot, pardner. It was this way. I happened to run into the Hotel Dodge to see Jeff—you cain't have forgot Jeff Davis? He shore hadn't forgot you. Wal, before I could say howdy even, Jeff grabbed me an' turned to a gurl standin' there. I went stiff at sight of her. 'What luck!' burst out Jeff. 'Heah he is now— Wess, this is Miss Neece. She has been askin' if any Texas trail driver might know Brazos Keene. An' I told her yu—Wess Tanner—was an old pardner of his.' The gurl's white face went red, then paled again. 'Please come,' she said, and led me off out of the lobby into the parlor.

" 'Yu know Brazos?' she asked, and she was trembling.

" 'Wal, I used to, Miss,' I said.

" 'Yu've heerd about me?'

" 'No. Sorry to confess I haven't,' I had to tell her.

" 'But yu *have* heerd about—what he did at Las Animas?'

" 'Yes, Miss. Thet's town talk heah. But I never believe range gossip, much less about Brazos Keene.'

" 'Oh! But it is all true—and I am his —fiancée.'

" 'Miss Neece, whatever Brazos done it was justified. He is a true-blue Texan, as fine a boy as ever forked a hawss—' Wal, she thanked me with tears streamin' down her lovely face. An' then she told me yu an' she had had a lover's quarrel. She was jealous of her twin sister. Yu had left her an' gone to town, where yu shot her dad's enemies, one of them the sheriff. Then yu rode away, thinkin' yu'd made yoreself an outlaw, which yu hadn't. She said she knew yu'd ride down into Texas an' she wanted me to undertake to find yu. Brazos, thet scared me to death. But no livin' cowboy could ever hev resisted her eyes, her voice.

" 'Could you find Brazos?' she asked. I said it was about a shore thing thet I could. 'Will yu?' she pleaded with me. 'No matter what time it takes—what

it'll cost. I have money. I'll pay.' I interrupted her there. I jest couldn't stand thet anguished face. An' I said, 'Lady, I cain't take yore money. I'll find Brazos for yu. An' thet hombre will shoot my laig off for my pains.' '*Shoot yu?*' she cried. 'He'll bless yu all the rest of his life!' "

"Right you were—Wess," mumbled Brazos thickly, fighting the wave on wave of emotion that swayed him. How terrible and sweet this news! "I'll shoot—yore laig off. Damn you! Wasn't I miserable enough? But tell the rest now, if there is any."

"There's plenty, pard. Let's have a drink first."

"No! Plenty? Wess, I cain't stand much more. But the idee? What was her crazy idee—coaxin' you to find me?"

"What do you think, old pard?" queried Wess, drawing a deep breath.

"Think? I cain't think. Only thet it was sweet of June. Tell me, or I'll choke it out of you."

Wess clapped a heavy hand on Brazos's shoulder. "Pard, Miss Neece's idee was to come with me—till I found you," replied Wess, his voice ringing.

"Come with—you? Heavens above!"

"Thet was her idee, Brazos. An' she did come."

Brazos could only stare in fearful stupefaction into the pale face of his friend.

"She's heah!" rang out Wess.

Brazos went blind. His shaking hand groped for Wess, who met it with his own and steadied him.

"Heah—*now?*" gasped Brazos, rousing to sensations that had almost disrupted his consciousness.

"Right now, pard. She's in with Mrs. Doan."

"Right now! She's heah!" echoed Brazos huskily. His legs went unsteady under him. He had to hold on to Wess. These were his physical reactions, which possessed him momentarily. Then, his mind released, wonder and joy followed, to lift him to seventh heaven.

"Brazos! For the good Lord's sake!" Wess was saying in faraway voice as he shook Brazos. "What ails yu? Man, yu should be the happiest man in all Texas. Why, I never seen yu like this. An' how many gurls have I seen yu crazy over? Shore, pard, this is different. This gurl is the real an' the last one. But—hell's fire, Brazos, yu haven't held up a bank or stole a hawss? Somethin' bad to clinch thet outlaw name?"

"Which—one?" whispered Brazos, his eyes closed tight.

"*Which one?* Say, the boy's dotty. No wonder— Which what? Which gurl, yu mean? Why yu pore locoed ghost of yore old self. It's yore sweetheart. Yore fiancée. The gurl yu're engaged to."

Wess's piercing whisper penetrated Brazos's tortured consciousness. The stupefying shock passed, if not its wake of emotion. Brazos let go of Wess and turned to the window. Gradually his dim sight cleared. Outside he saw Indians and horses, a sweep of gray slope leading up to the horizon. He found himself. What was this that had happened? The nameless thing he had felt had held him here at Doan's Crossing. For what? Retribution had caught up with him. One of the Neece twins had followed him. He had imagined it was June—the good and quiet—the sweet and noble girl whom he had worshiped. But June could never have undertaken this wild chase. She would never have deserted her father for an outlaw. It was Jan. It was Jan—that

passionate little devil who at last had given rein to the wildness in her.

"All right, Wess," declared Brazos finally, turning to his friend. "What's the rest?"

"Wal! Thet's more like my old pard," replied Wess, greatly relieved. "There ain't so much more. Yore gurl had a lot of baggage, Brazos. Easy to see she wasn't goin' back home. Ha! Ha! Wal, we loaded it on the stage. An' we rode with thet stage all the way from Dodge. There was several other passengers off an' on. They an' my boys, an' me too, fell turrible hard for yore sweetheart. I reckon the stage come purt' near bein' held up once by road agents. At least Bill Hempstead, our driver, said he knowed thet outfit. But we was too many. Afterward Miss Neece confessed she had a lot of money with her an' thet it was great luck for her thet we happened to be her bodyguard. I reckon thet's about all. Yu bet I never enjoyed the Old Trail like I did this time."

"Lot of baggage and money!" exclaimed Brazos, bewildered again. "Wess, tell me this is a nightmare."

"Nightmare, my eye! Look at thet—where yu bruised my wrist, squeezin' it so hard."

"I'm sorry, pard. Thanks for everythin'. I reckon I won't shoot yore laig off."

"Wal, I'm tolerable glad about thet. Brazos, I got a gurl myself, an' when yu've time yu must heah about her."

"Aw, thet's fine, Wess. I'll be glad to heah."

"Brazos, there's Mrs. Doan," went on Wess quickly. "She's lookin' for yu, I'll bet. Come, pard, yu better get it over. I cain't help sayin' I wouldn't mind bein' in yore boots."

Doan introduced Brazos to his wife, a comely, sturdy pioneer type, blond and buxom. She certainly gave Brazos a looking over before she relaxed into friendliness and sympathy.

"I think you had better see your fiancée at once. She is under a strain. I hope—nothing's wrong. She is sweet and she must care greatly for you."

"Cowboy, I seen thet an' I had it figured when she stepped off the stage. Such eyes! Black an' hungry as a starved Indian's!" added Doan, with his hearty smile.

"Wal, friends, she must think a lot of me," replied Brazos gravely. "It's too late now for me to worry about not bein' good enough for her an' ridin' away like I did. Take me to her."

"Wal, cowboy," interposed Doan impressively, "take it from me. A Texan like you is worth any two Yankee gurls thet ever was!"

Two girls! Brazos suffered a piercing stab. His quick flash of eyes assured him that the frontiersman was just bragging in the simplicity of his loyalty and pride.

"Tom, if Brazos is good enough for *one* girl—and half good enough for *this* one—we have a lot to be thankful for. Come, Brazos," added Mrs. Doan.

She led him to a door at the south end of the post. "This is my room, Brazos. You'll be secluded there. Make it up to her. Try to realize your great good fortune."

In the moment before he stepped into the room, Brazos faced his ultimatum. It was June he loved most and wanted for his wife, but it could never have been June who had the adventurous spirit to follow him. So Jan must never know. And love her he did, too, but not as he did June. In all humbleness, he told himself that he was lucky to have either of the twins give up

everything to come to him.

Brazos was tense and tingling when he opened the door. The room appeared large and bright. Sunlight streamed in the several windows, to give the furnishing a touch of warmth and vividness. He heard a gasp. Then he wheeled.

"Bra-zos!" whispered someone tremulously.

She had been standing almost behind the door, waiting, her face white, her lips parted, her eyes wide and dark. Brazos had not expected to see her in a white dress, but of course she had had time to change. Jan would never have let him see her travel-stained or disheveled. Her face was lovely, despite the havoc he read there. That mark of grief drew him as subtly as the gratitude and love which welled up upon sight of her.

"Jan! You sweet devil," he cried huskily, and held out his arms.

She had been already on the way to him. Apparently his poignant exclamation or the welcome of his gesture suddenly halted her for a moment, while a spasm crossed her face. It passed, and she flew to him, swaying the last step to his arms. She hid her face and clung to him.

"Brazos—darling. I—I had to come," she said in smothered tone.

"Wal, I couldn't be shore till I felt you—like this," he replied hoarsely, and he held her close and tight to his breast while he bent his head against her rippling hair. On the moment he could not see well. He seemed to float in that dim room.

"Don't—hug me—so," she whispered, almost inaudibly, "unless you—don't want me—to breathe. Brazos, you're not —angry?"

"Angry? No, Jan. I'm sort of buffaloed. My Gawd, child, it was sweet and good—and bad—of you to trail me heah."

"Bad?" she queried quickly.

"For you, dear. I'm an outlaw, you know. You've disgraced yourself, and all of them."

"But for *you*, Brazos, darling?"

"I reckon it's near heaven again."

"Oh! Then you forgive me."

"I probably will—if you kiss me like you did thet turrible night."

"Same old Brazos! Only you look—Brazos, tell me you won't send me back," she importuned softly.

"No, Jan. I cain't do thet."

"But you *want* me?" she flashed, with a show of her old fire.

"Yes. I'm mad about you, Jan. I reckoned I'd got over it, a little. But I hadn't."

"Darling! And J-June?"

"Wal, *she* didn't trail me, did she?"

It appeared then that a convulsion waved over the girl. She clung to Brazos with her face hidden against him. He felt her breast throb upon his. She did not weep. Her arms slid up round his neck. Blindly she raised her face, flaming now, with tears coursing from under her closed eyelids, and she found Brazos's lips with her own. And she kissed them again and again, left them for his cheeks and eyes only to return, until it seemed to Brazos that her kisses gathered strength and fire and passion as they multiplied. But suddenly she sank limp against him, her arms sliding down.

Holding her close, Brazos leaned against a table and tried to separate conflicting tides of emotion from tumultuous and overwhelming thoughts. Presently he could see clearly through the window, the blue sky beyond the green trees.

"Jan, I reckon we—might sit down," he said huskily, and half lifted her to the couch. But she would not let go of him. Weak and nerveless now, she still clung. "You must be kinda tired—all thet long stage ride."

"No. I wasn't tired," she said, lifting her head. "Just overcome at meeting you—scared weak. I was afraid you'd send me back—that—you—you love J-June best."

Brazos took her face between his hands and studied it gravely. The havoc he had seen appeared warmed out and the dark eyes had lost their strain. But there was a difference. Tiny blue veins he had never noticed before shone through the white of her temples; there were dark shadows under her eyes, magnifying them; her cheeks were thinner. Beauty abided there imperishably, but it was an older, nobler, sadder face.

"Let us talk—now." Her voice had quieted. "First I have much to tell."

"I reckoned you had, darlin'."

"Brazos—Dad died suddenly less than a week after you left," she began with tragic force.

"Aw! Jan! How awful!" cried Brazos, shocked to his depths. "My Gawd, I'm sorry! Thet fine upstandin' Westerner—not old atall—just got his home and daughters back! Aw! but this is a tough one on me. I was turrible fond of yore dad. Jan, I don't know what to say."

"Brazos, you've said enough. It comforts me. We knew you loved Dad—J-June and I. It was partly what you did for him that made us love you. But Dad is gone. And if I hadn't had you to think of—to save, I'd sunk under that blow."

"Save? Jan, you think I have to be saved?"

"Indeed I do. Thank heaven I caught up with you in time. Brazos, that is the saddest news. But there's more—not sad—yet it'll hurt you."

"Go ahaid, darlin'," replied Brazos simply. "I reckon I can stand anythin' now."

Jan averted her face. Her breast rose and fell, indicating oppression. Her hand tightened on Brazos's.

"It's about J-June."

"Shore, I reckoned thet. Don't keep me in suspense."

"She eloped with Henry Sisk—came home married!"

"What're you tellin' me, Jan Neece?" ejaculated Brazos fiercely.

"You heard me, darling." Her voice was low, but perfectly clear, carrying a note unfamiliar to Brazos.

"Jan, you lie!" Brazos leaped up in a perfect frenzy of amazement and fury.

"What motive could I have in telling you a lie?" she returned proudly. If she were lying it had all the guile and subtlety of a woman behind it. Brazos turned her face around so that he could see it in the light. Its pallor, the proud dark eyes, that peered straight and unfathomably into his, the set lips, almost stern now—these to Brazos were not eloquent of falsehood.

"Jan, I beg—yore pardon," he went on haltingly. "But that knocks me cold and sick, to my very gizzard. Worse than when I kill a man! But damn June's fickle heart! She loved *me*. She proved it—and then, all in no time—she shows yellow. Henry Sisk? Fine chap, shore, but he was sweet on you, wasn't he?"

"I thought so. He swore it."

"So he throwed you down for June?" demanded Brazos hotly.

"Something like that, darling."

"Did you care?"

"Yes, I did. It hurt. I'm a vain creature. But *I* couldn't marry Henry. On my soul of honor I couldn't."

"Why couldn't you, Miss Neece?"

"Because I loved you. I never knew how well until you ran away."

"Wal, Jan, yore bein' heah to tell me—to sustain me—keeps me from fallin' to a low-down hombre. Thet news would have just plumb knocked me forever."

"Oh, Brazos—darling. Can I make up for the loss of June?"

"I reckon. But let me be straight with you, Jan. If June hadn't turned out faithless and whatever else it was—neither you, however sweet and lovely you air, nor all the rest of the girls in the world, could have made up for the loss of her. Can you stand to heah thet?"

"Yes, Brazos, I—I can stand it," faltered Jan, her face drooping.

"Don't take it too hard, honey. I'm a queer duck. I always make amends. I always pay. You won't never be sorry thet I worshiped June—reckoned she was an angel. After all she was a part of you."

"Brazos, there's more to tell," went on Jan hurriedly. "I'm afraid again. You are such a strange fellow. So honorable and fine and true! I'll never forget you when, that night, J-June solved our problem by telling you to marry me—and you could have her, too."

"I wish to heaven I could forget it. Mebbe I can now—thet she's turned out so pore."

"Brazos, can you stand another surprise?" asked Jan fearfully.

He eyed her askance. But Jan did not look formidable just then or anything to be dubious about. He drew her into his arms, yet held her back, so he could study her face.

"Shoot, Jan. You cain't knock me out again."

"I'll bet I can."

"Ha! I won't bet. But tell me—"

She leaned back, toying with his scarf, provoking and adorable, but hiding her eyes.

"Could you stand a sweetheart—and a—a wife—who is very, very rich?"

"Good—Lord!" exploded Brazos, and then succumbed to incredible fate.

"Could you?" she repeated. "Just because you 'air a pore lone prairie cowboy,' you won't be too honorable and proud—to—to make those amends you spoke of?"

"What you got up yore sleeve?"

"Brazos, if I'm a very rich girl—that won't make any difference to you?"

"You're talkin' riddles. But I reckon—if you *was* a very rich girl—I wouldn't feel turrible bad about it."

She let out a sweet peal of glad laughter and caught him around the neck. "Brazos, listen. Henry bought my share of Twin Sombreros Ranch and two thousand head of cattle."

Brazos sat mutely staring at this apparition—this angel of fortune—this living refutation of his vain judgment of women.

"You see it hasn't turned out so badly, even if you have lost June."

"How much?" queried Brazos faintly.

"How much what? Oh, how much I love you? Oh, more than any girl ever loved any man."

"Jan, my heart is weak. Don't tease no more. How much did you sell out for?"

"I made a pretty good deal, Hank Bilyen said. For the cattle I got forty dollars a head. Figure that out."

"I cain't—darlin'—I cain't figger, or

add—or anythin'."

"Well, that comes to eighty thousand dollars. And I sold my half of the ranch for twenty thousand. I brought the money with me."

"Mercy!" begged Brazos.

"I got a few thousand in cash. Bilyen said 'Lord only knows what it'll cost to find thet feller.' And the rest in drafts on the Las Animas bank. Mr. Henderson fixed it up for me. I wasn't worried about the drafts when those road agents almost held us up. These drafts cannot be negotiated by anyone except your little girl. Savvy? But I was afraid I'd lose the cash. Now, Brazos, darling, now what are we going to do?"

"Now, Jan, darlin', what air we goin' to do?" mimicked Brazos in consternation.

"You're not exactly a poor cowboy down at his heels. You can do things."

"Jan, I cain't do nothin' but love you," replied Brazos abjectly.

"Well, that's grand. But I prefer you do a *little* besides loving me. Brazos, those boys with Wess Tanner, especially the dark handsome lad, they were sweet on me. And you know I'm unreliable. It seems to me you had better put a halter on me while you have the chance. Dad always said that once I was haltered, I'd steady down."

"Jan, at thet I believe you've changed—grown. But still the same old sweet devil."

"Brazos, we were engaged, you know," she said seriously. "I told everybody. I don't know how you really regarded our engagement. But if it hadn't been for that I never could have followed you."

"I savvy. And now thet you've come up with me—"

"You're perfectly free, Mister Keene, unless you want me as terribly as you wanted June," she interposed, her chin lifting and level searching eyes on him.

"Jan, will you take my solemn word?" asked Brazos.

"Yes, Brazos, I will."

"Wal, before I entered thet door I knew I'd ask you to marry me—first, because thet old love came thunderin' back—second, because I would have asked you if I hadn't loved you, I was struck so deep by yore trailin' me—and last because I could never let one word of range gossip get started about Jan Neece."

She appeared enraptured, almost satisfied, yet there was a restraint, a doubt about her that puzzled Brazos. He caught his breath and asked her to marry him.

"Yes, darling," she replied, and hid her face upon his shoulder.

"When?" he flashed, tense and keen, succumbing to the current of the great river that had swept him off his feet.

"Need we wait?" she asked. That indeed betrayed this frank and devilishly sweet Jan Neece at her truest.

"If I had my way we wouldn't wait atall," rang out Brazos.

"Your way is my way—and always shall be," declared the girl eloquently. And she arose to go to the window, where she peered out upon the prairie. Brazos saw that there was nothing soft and tremulous about her then. "If it is possible I will marry you here."

"Jan! It's shore possible. Doan told me they had a church heah. Course they'd have to have a minister."

"Run darling—and find out. Jan, you know, can change her mind." She did not turn away from the window.

Brazos leaped up, to forget his sombrero, and rush from the room. He en-

countered Doan and Tanner, both of whom received his onslaught in alarm.

"Tom! You said—you had a church—heah?"

"Yu bet we have."

"Then you've got a pastor."

"Naturally. An' a fine chap he is."

Brazos gulped. "Can he marry—Jan an' me—right away?"

"Wal, pard, yu're shore ridin' high, wide, an' handsome now," declared Wess, his bronze face shining.

"Go fetch him," cried Brazos excitedly, hanging on to both his friends. "Fetch him. Tell him to bring papers—and whatever I gotta have. Wess, you go with Tom. And call me when you get back."

"Brazos, I always knowed when yu got this way over a gurl yu'd be a ravin' lunatic," drawled Wess. "An' holy mavericks, am I glad?"

"Cowboy, air yu shore yu won't go out of yore haid before we can get back?" asked Doan, half in earnest and half in jest.

Not waiting to reply Brazos ran back to Mrs. Doan's door, halting when he came to it. He sensed a mysterious portent beyond that threshold. It checked him—held him with abated breath. But he knocked. There was no reply. Uncertain and strangely agitated, he entered the room. Jan was lying face down on the couch.

"Jan, dear, what ails you?"

"Oh, Brazos. I—I can't go through with it. I can't. I'm a little four-flush! I have none of the nerve you—you credited me with," burst from her in smothered tones.

Brazos's heart sank like lead. He suffered a moment of despair. But she must be overwrought—the suspense, the long trip, the ordeal with him had been beyond her.

"Darlin', you cain't what?" he asked tenderly. "I reckon you mean—marry me?"

"No! No!" she cried frantically, raising her face, to disclose it tear-wet and shamed, with tragic eyes dark upon him. "I'm crazy to—to marry you. I'll die if you won't have me. And, oh, misery, you'll hate me now!"

"Ump-umm, honey. I cain't hate you, no matter what you've done, so long as you're crazy to marry me."

"Brazos, I didn't know it'd be so hateful. I was just wild for you. I'd have done anything—anything. But now, you've been so sweet—and wonderful—I can't go through with it."

"Jan Neece, will you come out with it?" demanded Brazos in desperation.

"That's—just—it. I'm not Jan Neece—I'm *June!*"

"Lord Almighty! Am I drunk or crazy?" burst out Brazos, tearing his hair and staring incredulously at her. "Who air you?"

"Oh, Brazos! Don't look so—so awful at me. It's I! June—June Neece! Not Jan. I couldn't live without you. It was Jan who eloped with Henry. And I thought you loved her most—that *she* could do anything with you—and I came down here to find you—make you marry me first—then tell you afterward."

"You damned—devilish little cat!" declared Brazos, astounded beyond passion. "I don't believe you."

"Oh—Brazos," she wailed.

"I—don't—believe—you."

"But, darling, I *am* June. I swear to heaven I am. Jan couldn't have done this rash thing. She hadn't the nerve. She didn't love you enough. Why, I'm ashamed to admit, she was on Henry's neck as soon as you left. Brazos, you must see I'm telling the truth. If I

were Jan, intending to get you by hook or crook—would I be betraying my plot now? No! I'd wait till we were—married."

There was incontestable logic in this passionate confession. But Brazos chose to hide the ecstasy which was waving through him. He believed her now. Only those kisses had deceived him. She had acted them faithfully enough, though perhaps, once June had cast restraint and decorum aside, they had at last expressed her true fervor.

"I cain't believe you," said Brazos solemnly.

"But you *must*. Brazos, no girl ever before did such a thing. Oh! I'm not ashamed. I'd glory in it, if you just—just— Didn't I offer to let you marry Jan, and *give* myself to you, in the bargain? Brazos, darling, for God's sake, don't say you won't marry me now!"

"I will if you prove you're June," replied Brazos relentlessly. "I've had about all I can stand of takin' Jan for June—and June for Jan."

"Prove I'm June?" she echoed. "Of course I can. I *am* June. My name June is on the drafts for all that money."

Brazos sagged desperately under that potential proof. Bank presidents did not make colossal mistakes about making out drafts, especially when Henderson knew the Neece girls.

"Aw, you could fool Henderson just as easy as me. Haven't you fooled everybody under the sun? Yore own dad even— No, Miss Neece, you gotta prove you're June."

"Wait till we're married," she pleaded, so sweetly and humbly that Brazos smothered another wild desire to snatch her to his breast. Then an idea flashed into his rapturous mind.

"No. And let me remind you thet pastor with Doan and Wess, and I reckon everybody heah at this post, will be comin' pretty pronto."

"Beloved! Trust me!" she whispered beseechingly. "I would die of shame if they came now."

"Listen. June Neece had a birthmark like a bluebell—on her laig—didn't she?"

"Who told you that?" cried the girl, blushing scarlet.

"I heahed that when I first came to Las Animas. Everybody knew about it. The *only* way the Neece twins could be told apart! Wal, if you air June you shore have thet birthmark. Now haven't you?"

"Yes, Brazos Keene. I have," she retorted, at bay. "Will you trust me—until—?"

"I'll trust you afterward, forever. I reckon you deserve to suffer a little shame."

"Shame! *I* have nothing to be ashamed of, unless it's chasing an unchivalrous cowboy all over the south."

"Thet's a heap, I'm bound to admit—There! Girl, I reckon I heahed Wess's loud laugh out there. They've come with the parson. You better rustle or you may lose a husband."

"Brazos Keene, if you force me I—I won't have you for a husband," she cried loftily. She was white of face again and her eyes burned with reproach.

"I'll risk thet, darlin'. You cain't get out of marryin' me now, if only to save yore good name and yore pride."

"Very well, cowboy! Come over to the light," she returned, with what seemed a calm disdain.

Brazos followed her haltingly to the window. He felt her gaze upon him and dared not meet it. Moreover, his eyes were glued to her shapely capable

hands as they grasped her gown at each side. She lifted it and her white skirts. Her trim ankles, her slender graceful legs, her rounded knees and pink garters sharply outlined against her black stockings led Brazos's fascinated gaze to her white thighs.

"You should know this would be apple pie for Jan," she said with a suppressed giggle that belied her haughty scorn of this exacting lover. "I've forgotten which leg it's on—the left, I'm sure. Look—"

Merry voices outside preceded knocks on the door. Brazos, with the wonderful swiftness of that right hand, snatched her skirts down.

"Aw, darlin', I was only foolin'," he whispered.

"Yes, you were," she taunted. "Did you see it?"

"No. I couldn't see nothin'. Besides, June, I shore knew you all the time."

"Liar! I could have fooled you—I wish—oh!"

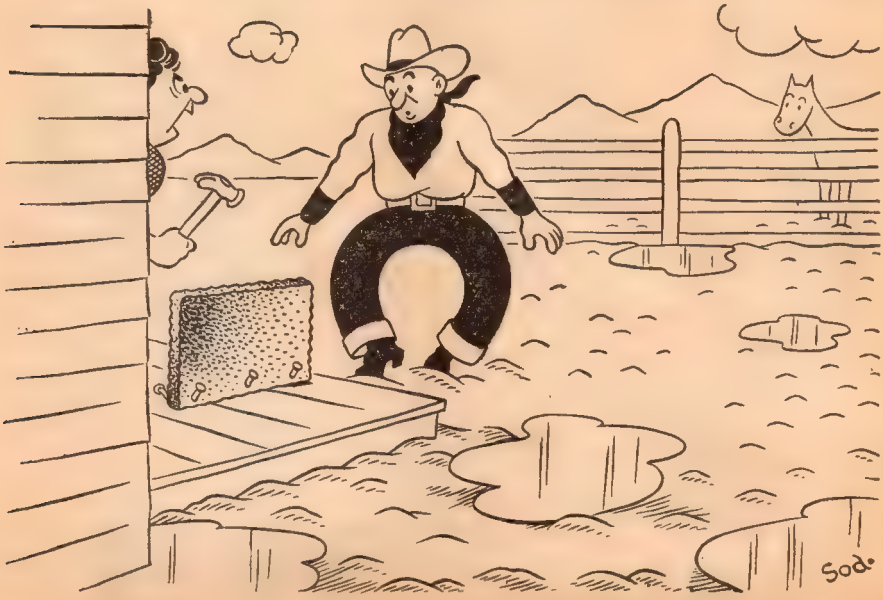
Louder and more impatient knocks sounded upon the door. June smoothed her ruffled gown.

"Brazos, we're heah, all ready to make yu the happiest cowboy in Texas," called Wess, his voice ringing.

"Can we come in?" Doan's booming voice attested to the joy he felt. "Parson, papers, witnesses, an' all."

"Just a minnit more, Tom," drawled Brazos. "The lady has consented to become Mrs. Keene. But, doggone it! she hasn't proved yet which one of the Twin Sombrero twins she really is!"

THE END



"Wipe Yore Feet!"

Hell Was Never So Snug

A YOUNG NESTER, *his pretty wife, a raging blizzard, and a gang of uninvited hard-case "guests" in a two-room cabin spell suspense and action in this outstanding ZGWM original.*

By Giff Cheshire

THE blizzard that raked the Opalcos drove four men through the tangled brakes separating the mountains from the Bear Creek country. Their horses floundered, droop-headed and spent. Dust was shoving in, Kincaid suspected, though a man couldn't tell in the vast, encircling gloom, and none of them had a watch. He shifted in the saddle, feeling the heavy swirl of flakes against his face.

He cursed the unending canyons and obstructing rims that labored their way. They had to reach shelter soon, or they were going to be in a bad spot. Urquhart, in the lead, pulled his horse back from a drifted draw and halted the party. He struck his fists together to warm them as he studied the situation.

"We got to keep going, Syl!" Cal Peabody said, in a voice that was almost a moan. "Goddlemighty, we'd ought to have stayed in that damned cave!"

Big Urquhart regarded Peabody studiously. "Any suggestions?"

"Yeah—let's ride."

"As long as I'm running the shebang, I'll make the decisions," Urquhart snapped.

The leader inspected the drift patiently, then flung searching looks in either direction. Finally he started his horse to the right, down the reach of the canyon, the opposite of what seemed the logical way to get through.

Urquhart found a pass that took them down onto a slant swept cleaner of snow. They went faster after that, and spirits picked up perceptibly. Distances were lost in the swirling curtain, and they were upon the banks of the upper Bear before they realized what Urquhart was driving for. They were safe, for they could follow the creek in almost any kind of light or storm until they came to the remote little cow outfit that was their objective.

It put the ghost of a smile on Syl Urquhart's lips, but he did nothing by way of taking tribute. When he turned from the creek presently, cutting left, the others followed without question. It seemed only a few minutes until they rode up to the little habitation.

It was nearly dark, and a lamp had been lighted. As the horses scuffed up in the nearly impassable snow, the door swung open and a slim young man stood framed there.

"Put your horses in the corral and come in. It's going to be a hell of a night."

"We'll do that," Urquhart said, with no further explanation.

The four turned their horses into the corral below a small pole barn, then made their way back to the house. The structure was a dugout, though roomy, and it was heavily banked with snow. Kincaid was the last one in, and the last to discover why the others showed sudden new interest as they entered.

A girl sat in the corner of the square room, and the mere sight of her took Kincaid's breath for a moment. He had never seen one prettier. She gave them a quick, impersonal smile of greeting, then returned her attention to her sewing.

Kincaid felt something clutch at his throat. This was something they hadn't known until now, for there had been no sign of a woman on the place. It wasn't good, and if he had known he

would have objected strongly against coming here for refuge.

The laws of hospitality on the open range had forced the man to invite them in and would require him to make them welcome until it was safe for them to leave. The rules likewise prevented his asking any questions. He looked smart, and maybe he was guessing, but no man could guess all. This pretty woman's being here was bad, and Kincaid experienced both regret and dread.

Kincaid had halted just inside the door, with relish of the room's heat in sharp contrast to his mood. A rough fireplace had been dug into the earth at the far end, and logs that must have been laboriously snaked in from the foothills were in roaring flame. Skins had been thrown on the tamped floor and, with pieces of gay cloth, had been tacked on the walls. There was a sense of home here, in this outland habitation, such as Kincaid had not felt in twenty years.

The man swung the crane with its big kettle from the fireplace. "Stew," he said, "but it's good." He got bowls from a curtained shelf, his nod bidding the woman to keep seat. He filled and placed them on the rough, bare table, then filled mugs from the blackened coffeepot.

Kincaid flung a look at his companions, trying to read what new thought had been stirred by this unforeseen discovery. Syl Urquhart, huge though giving no impression of overweight or flabbiness, was young, and his eyes were chilling except when he deliberately warmed them for a purpose, as now. His glance kept flicking from the young cowman to the girl in the chair. Then he heeled around and took seat at the table.

Cal Peabody was short and in his early forties, as was Kincaid. He seemed to have no interest in the girl, at least not until he had filled his empty middle. Bert Snell, a stocky man with kinky red hair, went straight to the table also. Kincaid took the remaining place, knowing that this new interest had struck deepest into Urquhart, who had not been near a town and its gratifications in nearly three months.

"My name's Hull," the cowman said. "Jim Hull. I've been running cattle up here the last four years."

He frowned slightly when no names were offered in exchange. Kincaid knew that fact alone had tipped Hull off to what he had taken into his home. From his side of the table Kincaid could see the girl, and he noted that her gaze came swiftly to them and then away in a thoughtful frown. Kincaid supposed she was Hull's wife, for there was no physical resemblance. Hull was probably deliberately refusing to focus any attention on her by introducing her to them.

Kincaid was wolfishly hungry and continued to eat, wondering how long the storm would hold them here. The wind had climbed to a shrill blast by the time they finished the meal. The girl rose and, with an impersonal nod, went through a door to a lean-to—the bedroom, apparently, for she did not return.

Urquhart went over and took her chair. Hull remained standing by the fire, his brow knitted, while Peabody and Snell quickly appropriated the room's other good chairs. Kincaid stayed on one of the benches at the table and rolled himself a cigarette. Then he began to stack the dishes, looking about for a place to wash them.

"My wife'd rather you left them for

her," Hull said.

Kincaid felt a little sorry for the man. He did not answer.

Presently Hull said, "Well, good night. Sorry we don't have any spare beds to offer. But there's plenty of wood. Use all of it you need to keep warm."

"We'll make out," Kincaid said, and for some reason he suddenly grinned at him.

Hull stepped to the door of the bedroom, and Kincaid expected it was because he was anxious to talk with his wife.

Syl Urquhart flung a grin at his men, plainly enjoying the fact that they had upset the young pair. It riled Kincaid, and he did not trouble to hide it. Urquhart had a quirk of character that prompted him to spit in the face of human decency. Now he relished the fact that he was nettling Kincaid with his unvoiced implications.

After deliberately hunting around for whisky and failing to find it, Urquhart stretched out in the rocker and apparently went to sleep. Yet Kincaid knew it was a relaxation from which the man could rouse in the wink of an eye, in a panther's alertness and fury.

Peabody presently pulled the two benches together and stretched out before the fire. Snell cleared the used dishes from the table and piled them in a careless heap on the floor, then usurped the table and apparently went to sleep.

Kincaid turned his back to the fire and stood staring at his saddlemates. He could pull his gun and kill the three of them in this moment. He knew that he ought to do it. Without giving them a fighting chance, much as that ran against the grain of his own peculiar code. He placed his length on the hearth, finally, and then drifted off into sleep.

When he wakened dawn was gray upon the dugout's two windows. He had been roused, he discovered, by Hull's coming out of the bedroom. Kincaid shoved up stiffly, noting that his three saddlemates still slept.

He nodded to Hull without speaking and caught from the young cowman's eyes the fact that he was branded in the same stripe as the rest. He knew that there was no least thing to mitigate his trailing with them. For better than a year he had operated with the bunch, which included two successful strikes, together with the ruinous one. In each of the three there had been ruthless killings. He had done none of them but he shared the responsibility. He could make no brief for himself, nor did he care to. He had never been any good, and this must be plain upon his face. Yet Hull's guarded contempt cut into him.

Kincaid stepped to a window, which was partly glazed with ice. The rest, he discovered, was banked snow, piled there in the night. The wind had died beyond the walls, but the window's opacity denied him information as to the storm. He knew that it made little difference, for Syl Urquhart would not leave now. In the first place, there was no place they could go to safely without days of riding. In the second, this was as snug a refuge as a man could ask for. Finally, it offered even more than that.

A kind of nettling futility broke in Kincaid and he hauled around. He saw that Hull was starting to fix breakfast, which meant that the woman probably did not intend to emerge. The two were probably clinging to a desperate hope that their unbidden guests would leave

with the day. Hull poured sourdough from a crock into a greased pan and set the pan upon the hot stones within the fireplace beside the bed of red coals. He returned to the table and began to slice bacon.

Instinctively, Kincaid joined in, emptying the coffeepot into the slop pail and starting it afresh. Presently he turned back to Hull and said softly, "You're worried about your work. Maybe I can do it for you."

He saw relief in Hull's eyes, but nothing more. "A man has riding to do in weather like this," Hull said. "Lots of it. Norma usually helps me, but I don't guess he'd let us out together." He nodded toward Urquhart, who apparently was still asleep.

Kincaid nodded with a sour twist to his lips. He didn't understand at the time why he spoke as recklessly as he did. "His name's Urquhart. That one on the table is Snell, and the other one is Peabody. My name's Kincaid."

"Ah," Hull said softly, "the Urquhart gang."

"You guessed something like that, didn't you?"

Hull nodded. "And it means you'll stay till the storm's over. We were afraid of it, anyhow, but we hoped. We're on a shoestring here, Kincaid. Not exactly fixed to keep four extras very long." He shrugged, with a tightening in his lean young face. "Hell, I guess that's neither here nor there."

Kincaid knew that it wasn't, and things unspoken passed between them, things that perhaps Jim Hull was reluctant even to acknowledge in his own thought. Leaving aside the fact that one of the Hulls was an extraordinarily attractive woman, there was the point that Syl Urquhart was not liable to leave either alive when the bunch left. The man would see no good for getting a chase on their trail, however long it might take Jim Hull to get word spread. Not when they could clear the country in comparative ease and safety, once the weather broke for a time.

Then a new voice intruded on Kincaid's thoughts as Urquhart spoke from his chair. "Blast you, Kincaid, what're you up to? What's the idea of blabbing our names?"

Kincaid flung him a look of contempt, then his gaze settled. Urquhart had drawn his gun, and he held it in a hand steadied on his lap.

"Lift your arms, Kincaid. You, too, Hull."

He rose, light and easy, and, coming forward, took Kincaid's gun. He broke and emptied it, then pocketed the shells and shoved the empty gun into his own belt. He stepped to the corner where Hull's Winchester stood, and jacked out the loads. These he also pocketed, then with utmost indifference holstered his own gun.

"Kincaid," he said, "you've been acting funny for a couple of months. I think we're finished with you."

Kincaid never broke gaze, though he knew that had been his death warrant. He wondered if it had done anything to change Hull's attitude toward him and found himself hoping that it had. He was willing to risk paying that price. Somehow the incontestable compulsion had been in him to convey to Jim Hull a little of hope, a little something of the fact that he was at least not without a friend.

Peabody and Snell had climbed to their feet, aroused by Urquhart's noisy movement. They gathered the situation quietly, each stabbing at Kincaid with suspicious eyes.

Norma Hull came out then, fully clad, for she too had gathered the meaning of the incident. Her cheeks were drained, but there was a stout courage in her, conveyed by her stance and deliberation. She eyed Syl Urquhart coldly.

"You're a direct man, aren't you? You take what you want."

Urquhart gave her an easy smile, and Kincaid thought he had never seen a woman so ravaged by a pair of eyes. "And why shouldn't I?"

"Since you have the power, you mean?" the girl asked.

"Power, guts, and money," Urquhart replied calmly, "will get a man anything he wants in this world. And now, lady, I'm partial to a woman's cooking. Supposing you finish up breakfast."

Norma Hull moved silently to the wall that served as the kitchen area. Kincaid did not like the look of desperation he saw rising on her husband's face. Kincaid had his regret now that he had not killed the trio in cold blood the night before, as he had been tempted. Yet he knew that, lived over, the outcome would have been the same. His mistake had been in revealing their identity.

If he hadn't done that, it was possible Urquhart would have been willing to play along behind an innocuous front for a time, which at least would have been somewhat easier on the Hulls' nerves. Yet Kincaid had an impatience with masked maneuvering. It was just as well that the cards were down. He knew that Urquhart would play the situation for every ounce of cruel pleasure in it for himself, probably through to the end of the storm.

The Hulls ate with the intruders, and afterward Jim turned to Urquhart. "I'm trying to run a cow outfit here, mister. I've got a couple hundred head of steers that'll need looking after this morning. My wife usually helps me. I couldn't possibly get out of this valley, if I tried. Is it all right for us to go out for a look around?"

"Why, I'll send the boys along with you," Urquhart said. "No reason for the missus to go out in that. She and me'll stay and do the dishes. Boys, go help Hull punch his cows."

Hull's shoulders sagged, and he said no more nor did he show any inclination to stir out, after that. The fear rose in Kincaid now that Urquhart would force them out, as much to torture Hull as anything. He expected this so strongly he was surprised when Urquhart didn't. The girl cleaned up after breakfast and tidied the house. Kincaid, watching carefully, himself replenished the wood supply so that Hull would not have to go out even for that.

Urquhart, for the time being, contented himself with asking Hull a few questions, which revealed that the nearest neighbor was some twenty miles away, that they were twice that distance from the closest town, and that no outsider ever was in here after winter had locked the mountain pass. It eased Urquhart, who patently was preparing for a long and comfortable stay.

The day dragged past. At bedtime Urquhart gave the screw one more twist.

"You go right about your regular business, kid. The boys'll give you a hand with anything you want done. They'll likewise see you don't ride too far."

A pulse beat strikingly at Jim Hull's temple. Urquhart's lips hiked in a grin,

then he flung a look at Kincaid, raking him for his rebellion and defying him to do anything to interfere with the fun.

Hull flung him a look of absolute hatred. "You're straight out of hell, aren't you?"

Urquhart's eyes were still bland. "Nice change, too—it's snugger here. I like it." He turned to Peabody. "Cal, I got a feeling we better shake this place down. You poke around in that bedroom for a hide-out gun. Gather up all their knives. Me, I like my sleep."

"How about Kincaid?" Snell asked.

Urquhart grinned. "Oh, we'll kill him, in time. But he's a man I don't want to see die happy. We'll take turns sleeping from here on."

Peabody, a little later, came from the bedroom carrying a .45. "Good hunch, boss. He had it hid in his pillow. I got an idea he aimed to try and use it tonight."

Snell, meanwhile, had collected the two butcher knives Norma Hull employed in her kitchen work. The Hulls turned paler, a little more hopeless, and retired to the bedroom.

Kincaid found little sleep that night. Stretched as before upon the warm hard earth before the fireplace, he poked a mental finger into the scant loopholes he could find, discovering each to end in a stone wall. A violent move on his or Hull's part would terminate in sudden and final gunplay, which was something Urquhart meant to employ anyhow at the most convenient time.

For Hull and his wife, or her alone, to escape and get safely away was out of the question as long as the blizzard endured. Better to wait here and watch the fall of the cards. As for himself, he might make a desperate, bárehanded play against an armed Urquhart, which stood little chance of success and which, even if successful, would still leave Peabody and Snell, either of whom would delight in taking up where Urquhart left off.

Kincaid slept in snatches, and each time he awakened it was to an odd and deceptive atmosphere of peace. Snell or Peabody or Urquhart would be awake, drowsy but watchful. This troubled Kincaid not at all, for he had no hope of being able to surprise them.

He was surprised when, the next morning, the Hulls emerged from their room with a faint but notable easing apparent in their manner. Kincaid sensed that some decision had come to them in the night's privacy, perhaps the outline of a plan. If they could figure their way out of this deadly situation, they were shrewder than he; yet they possessed an advantage he lacked in their closer familiarity with the spread, country, and household itself. Yet they kept a careful guard over the new spirit in them.

With his breakfast consumed, Syl Urquhart shoved back from the table and regarded the rest. "You buzzards had better go down and take care of the horses. And don't spare the hay." Snell and Peabody stirred, as did Kincaid. "You, too, Hull!" Urquhart snapped.

Hull flung a desperate look at his wife, who nodded so imperceptibly Kincaid thought he was the only one to note it. Yet Hull's face was bleak and pinched as he got into a coat. There was a moment when he seemed on the point of attacking Urquhart barehanded, with the big man's mocking face inviting it.

The weather had cleared, Kincaid noted, when he followed the others

outside. A faint haziness hung in the atmosphere, but it was full of light. Snow was banked deeply within the compound and its few structures. The barn was not so far from the house but what a commotion could be heard. Kincaid had a feeling Urquhart was only having his amusement out of Hull, this time.

Their mounts were in the corral with three of Hull's horses, and all were huddled miserably against the rear wall of the barn. Within were a few calves and three emaciated cows Hull had brought in from the range for special care.

The men broke the ice from the watering-troughs so the stock could drink. Peabody pitched a generous heap of Hull's jealously conserved wild hay to the horses. Hull issued a more conservative ration to the cows, his face white, his head slightly cocked as though he were listening intently.

Kincaid wished devoutly he could have a talk with the man. If he were fully privy to what the Hulls intended to do, he might help them. But he knew they did not trust him.

When they returned to the house, Urquhart was in his chair, idly watching the woman at her after-breakfast work. In that moment Kincaid's hatred of the man was deep and shaking. Flicking a glance at Kincaid, Urquhart seemed to catch this, and it sharpened his pleasure in the situation.

This day also wore out its tortured hours, with no resumption of the snow storm. The third night passed, slow and punishing. Again Urquhart wound up the breakfast meal with cynical orders.

"Looks like we're running out of fresh meat. Matter of fact, I ain't had a good steak since we been here. You boys bring up a young steer and then beef it."

It created the pattern of tension that by now was becoming familiar. Hull seemed as anxious to break it as Kincaid, and turned without protest to get his coat. Kincaid followed, with Snell and Peabody upon his heels. But this morning a troublesome horse, while they were saddling at the corral, gave Hull his opportunity to speak by swinging him close to Kincaid. Hull whispered hurriedly:

"Strychnine—she'll take it, if she has to."

Kincaid felt his throat tighten. Most foothill ranches kept strychnine on hand as a defense against timber wolves. The probability of the Hulls having a supply on hand was something Urquhart apparently had not thought of. It was a grim, a terrible way for the girl to frustrate the man's obvious intentions. Yet Kincaid found himself glad she had it. He knew she would never let Urquhart reach a point where she could not use it.

Jim Hull led the way, breaking a slow trail through the snow. Yet the going was less difficult than Kincaid had expected. With the storm apparently over, he felt there was a chance the Hulls could get out if they could slip away. Even in deeper snow they could travel on foot by using the crude homemade skis typical to the country. He knew now that he would pay any price to give them that chance, for Jim Hull had trusted him, had recognized a kindred horror and felt the need to ease it in the one bleak way possible.

At some distance from headquarters, they found dead steers upon the snow, animals Hull might have saved had he been allowed to tend to them properly. Yet this was of little importance, and

it seemed not to disturb Hull. In a hollow a little farther on he roped a steer, which they took in.

A lifetime of danger had never given Kincaid a moment like the one he experienced as they drew near the house, which stood in calm serenity under the poplars, imbedded in snow. He knew the iron will it took for Jim Hull to make the approach, then, when the steer was corralled, to go with apparent lack of haste to the house.

Syl Urquhart stood by the fireplace. Norma was sewing.

Kincaid felt that it had gone far enough, but now the men were compelled to go forth again to butcher the steer and bring back a quarter of fresh meat. Kincaid himself cut steaks, and Norma Hull immediately began to prepare their noon meal.

There was something in the atmosphere Kincaid could not define when they sat down at the table a little later. He saw the high color in Norma Hull's face, and the stony impassivity in her husband's. The steaks were big and sizzling on the platter, and Kincaid watched his three saddlemates begin with wolfish appetites. The woman filled cups with black coffee and brought them carefully to the table.

Syl Urquhart consumed two steaks, together with a generous heap of fried potatoes, before he touched his coffee. Then he lifted it to his lips—and held it before him.

Kincaid in that instant caught the full import of the situation. Jim Hull's eyes were a little too intently upon Urquhart. The woman was staring at her plate, which she had scarcely touched. It came to Kincaid then that Hull's information about the strychnine had been a warning.

He recalled that Hull had made the coffee. They were too closely watched to try to poison individual cups, but it would have been fairly easy to mix strychnine crystals with the coffee grounds at some early point in the morning. So it was all poisoned—

Watching Urquhart toy with his cup, Kincaid feared that the man suspected. As with most men to whom coffee is a diversion as well as a refreshment, these men habitually saved it to go with a cigarette. Now Bert Snell, with a smoke rolled, lighted it and picked up his cup. Urquhart made no move to stop him.

Kincaid felt the skin on his back tighten. Snell stoop a sip, and put the cup down. His mouth twisted slightly, he reached for the sugar. That seemed to be the confirmation Urquhart had been waiting for.

"That's enough," he snapped. "Leave it alone, Bert." His gaze switched to Hull. "Hull, drink your coffee."

Hull swallowed, but he reached out for his cup.

"No!" Norma cried, and she reached for her own and lifted it frantically to her lips.

It was Urquhart himself who slapped it out of her hand, coming to his feet with a broad grin. "I wasn't too sure of it, but I thought you went to a little too much fuss when you ground that coffee this morning. Hull, I'd make you drink it except I kind of like having you around."

Bert Snell sat with a drained and frozen face. "You let me drink it!" he gasped.

"Hell, you didn't get enough to give you more than a bellyache."

But Snell rushed outside to tickle his throat and retch. Peabody watched it all with a sardonic grin. Urquhart demanded the poison and tossed the con-

tainer into the fire.

"How do you know that's all?" Peabody asked, and malice was mixed with humor in his eyes.

"It better be."

"Right, or we're dead pigeons. It strikes me I ain't going to enjoy my grub, after this."

"Any suggestions?"

"Let's get rid of 'em now. Kincaid, too. He's a damned sidewinder."

Urquhart seemed to study it, then shook his head. "Not yet. We'll make them eat some food first. They won't try it again."

All strength and all hope seemed to have gone out of the Hulls. Kincaid got a grip on his nerves but only with effort. Yet the increased tension was general, he realized. Though he kept his unruffled exterior, Urquhart seemed to have been sobered somewhat. Privately the man was being forced to admit the tough and admirable fiber in the Hulls that had caused them to make the attempt. It baffled Urquhart, subtracting considerably from his brutal dominance. Wolf poison turned on wolves; Kincaid thought it fitting.

Snell came in from outside, his own malice high. He resented the fact that Urquhart had used him to test the suspected coffee. He might have swallowed a lethal dose. It only served to sharpen a fact no outlaw let slip far from his mind—the fact that no man could fully trust those with whom he rode the back trails. All men feared a hidden traitor and hated the one revealed. For this reason, Kincaid thought, Cal Peabody was in sympathy with Snell for the moment and nursing his own particular grudge against Urquhart.

Kincaid spoke indolently to Hull from his stance by the fireplace. "I don't expect you've ever had it easy up here."

Hull looked at him searchingly. "It hasn't been bad. Slow going, though. We were just getting to where we'd have a pretty good market cut of beef, each year." Kincaid noted that he used the past tense, which meant that his hope had run out.

"With sixteen thousand dollars," Kincaid said, "you could turn it into a big outfit overnight. There's ten thousand on Urquhart's head, dead or alive. Two thousand each on us three small-fry."

Urquhart, brooding at the window, wheeled around. "What in hell're you driving at?"

Kincaid grinned at him and shrugged. "Just making talk."

He was eased with the determination set in him, and it let him think with clear, cool logic. Syl Urquhart was the only solid factor he had to work with, Peabody and Snell having been turned unstable and apt to jump either way.

Kincaid saw decision come into Urquhart's face also. The man flicked Peabody a searching look. "I reckon you had the right idea, Cal. I aim to stick around here a while yet, and I aim to have my comfort. You and Bert take 'em off someplace. Come back alone. And don't hurry."

From the pleasure that leaped into Peabody's eyes, Kincaid knew there was no vestige of hope from the man. Snell, though still grumpy, seemed to accept the order without objection.

Norma Hull looked at Urquhart, calm and intent. "I'll go with them. And if they don't come back, I won't."

The big leader shook his head. "If you insist on going, you won't like the way your man looks when he goes with you."

The girl's slim body sagged against the table. Her head tilted, and she remained quiet. Kincaid deliberately placed himself between Jim and Urquhart so that Hull had no chance for a foolhardy break. Once more the quartet moved out of doors and toward the horse corral.

Kincaid did not mean to get out of earshot of the soddy, and was relieved to find his nerves were steady and his mind cool and clear. They went through the door of the barn, Kincaid leading the way, with Hull behind and followed by Peabody and Snell. There was an instant when the dusky interior blinded them slightly, and Kincaid had built a lot upon this fact.

As the door banged shut behind the last man, bringing the duskiness to its maximum, Kincaid shoved sharp and hard to his right. Time after time he had pictured this interior, and now he drove straight for the notch between the piled loose hay and the barn wall. He stumbled knee-deep in the hay, trying to scramble to the corner before anybody could recover wits enough to take a shot at him. He heard Snell utter a curse, and behind him a gun blasted.

Untouched, Kincaid plunged on, cutting around the pile at the barn corner and getting it between himself and the guns. There was no sound from Jim Hull, who apparently had had no chance for anything of his own. Kincaid knew that his own position was all but hopeless. Scraping sounds and jarred loose floor told him somebody was following.

Kincaid kept moving on the course he had picked while reviewing his memory of the barn. The floor of the hay loft was on poles, not extended under the eaves, so that a gap was left. Now he got a purchase on a brace and lifted himself quickly. A moment later he was slithering across the loft. He knew they would not hesitate to follow him boldly, knowing he was not armed.

He shoved without halting toward the big maw by which hay was pitched into the loft, then leaped out, landing softly in the snow. This was the critical point in his plan, and he prayed that the soft hay had confused their impression of his movements. The drop to the ground had made little sound. He remained quiet, expecting a shot through a crack in the wall. When none came, he moved again, driving toward the horse corral.

Gaining a corner, he followed along the lower side of its outer fence, made the turn, and came left. He meant to get to the house or near to it. Urquhart might come out to investigate that shot, or he might take it that his men had no taste for riding afield for the chore he had given them. Either way, Kincaid aimed to keep him busy long enough to give Norma a chance to get away. Even though it cost her husband's life, Kincaid knew Jim Hull would approve.

Kincaid waited, scarcely daring to breathe. There was a complete stillness inside the barn, which indicated that Peabody and Snell were temporarily stumped. Probably only one of them was pursuing, with the other obliged to keep a gun on Jim Hull. Kincaid's next objective was the blind side of the soddy, and he made the sprint. The snow in that direction was untraveled, and it handicapped him dangerously.

He was nearly in cover when a gun cracked sharply at the barn. Kincaid sprawled, feeling a terrific chill against his side and within, and he knew he was badly hit. He rode down his reel-

ing senses, flat on the snow, and heard a gun bark twice again.

The barn door banged and he dared raise his head enough to see Jim Hull race out. He wasn't too certain, but he thought Hull held a six-gun in his hand. The man beelined for the house.

He was nearly there when a gun fired again and he pitched down. Kincaid suppressed a groan. He saw the barn door come slowly open, and Cal Peabody stepped out cautiously, a gun in his fist. It dawned on Kincaid that Hull was much closer to himself than to Peabody. He shoved to a stand and staggered toward the fallen man.

He took another slug but kept going until he reached Hull, then let himself fall flat. When he raised his head cautiously again, the barn door was shut. Peabody must have dodged back inside to fort up.

Kincaid wondered what had happened to Snell and how Hull had got free. The lad apparently had wrested this gun from Snell, for Kincaid recognized the weapon. There had been those two shots in the barn. He hoped Hull had fired them, with effect.

Hull's hat had been knocked off, and the side of his head was bloody. Yet his chest showed breath. Though Kincaid's own body seemed partly paralyzed below the waist, he burrowed into the snow. It was no protection, for Peabody had only to climb to the hayloft for elevation, but it was the best Kincaid had. Then it dawned in his sluggish mind that he was exposing Hull to additional fire by remaining here. He had to move.

He wondered what was going on inside the soddy. Urquhart had taken no hand in this game of tag, yet there had been no outcry from Norma. Kincaid remembered that she had proposed to take strychnine if she had to, and wondered if she had managed to hide out enough for that.

He began to crawl to his right, and it drew no fire from the barn. He moved in closer to the sodhouse. It astonished him when he gained its corner and moved onto the blind side without being molested.

He paused, steadied somewhat but beginning to feel pain. He had been shot twice in the side, and he knew he was beyond hope. Yet the iron clutch of his will kept him conscious. He weighed the situation and knew he had to kill Urquhart, if he could. Of the two, Cal Peabody was the lesser evil. Maybe Peabody was cynically leaving this fight for Urquhart to finish, hoping to be the only male survivor. Kincaid crawled up to the wall of the soddy, and still could hear no sound from within.

It was safe to assume that Urquhart by now had gathered an inkling of what had happened and was watching the progress of the thing. Kincaid now was cut from view of the soddy's windows. Yet Urquhart must know his approximate location.

Kincaid regretted there was nothing but the one door, the two windows in the main room, and the small window in the lean-to bedroom. He wished that somehow he could draw his enemy outside. As fast as time was running out, he decided to wait in the hope that Urquhart would consider him finished and emerge.

Kincaid kept fighting off a blackish-red haze. Now he took time to examine the gun and saw that two shells had been exploded. He smiled grimly. That meant that Jim had probably fired them. It could well mean that Bert Snell had taken lead, that Peabody

might have, also, in Hull's surprise jump.

Steadily weakening, Kincaid dared not play a waiting game. With instant decision, he crawled to his right, hugging the dugout wall. He passed under the bedroom window and went on, and at the front corner he turned without hesitation. He was exposed now to the barn, and somebody down there must see him. But he drew no attack from that direction. It made him pretty sure that Peabody was playing it cautiously, waiting for the pieces to settle in the hope of falling heir to Urquhart's plans, unless he had been knocked out of the fight—

Kincaid got under the near front window without trouble and went on to the door. Unless he had made some betraying sound, there was a chance that Urquhart did not have him too carefully spotted. Kincaid dragged himself to his knees, braced on the door jamb, and rose. He had the gun in his right fist, and he jerked the latch with his left, wheeled the door inward, and lunged forward.

After the blinding glare of the snow, he now suffered from the handicap he had used against Snell and Peabody. There was a second in which he could see nothing except the red glow of the fireplace. Then it was a streak of flame, from a different location, followed by a rocking blast. Kincaid fired as he took more lead, then he pitched forward.

He fought to shove back the curtains of black that tried to close before his eyes. He heard Norma Hull's small, tense cry, and as he lifted his head she was running across the floor toward him.

"Jim?" she cried. "I saw him fall! Is he dead?"

It was then that Kincaid saw the sprawled figure of Urquhart. "Jim's all right, I think," he gasped. "Get Urquhart's gun."

"I've got it. You killed him."

"Go to Jim. I think Peabody's still in the barn, but he wouldn't try to shoot you. Get Jim in here—fort up—and you'll be all right—"

The last words were ragged. Kincaid was fighting desperately now to hold on. It did not seem unfitting that Norma Hull should desert him in this moment to run to her man.

Kincaid had nothing to wait for, after that, but the tough instincts in him made him hold on. He was aware of it when she dragged her husband inside. Then he realized she had dropped to her knees beside him. He heard her gasp of dismay and know she had taken a close look at him for the first time.

"Did you fasten the door?" he whispered. "You can hold Peabody off till he gets hungry and cold. Then he'll probably go."

"Peabody's dead," Norma answered. "I saw him sprawled in front of the barn door and investigated. Snell's inside, finished."

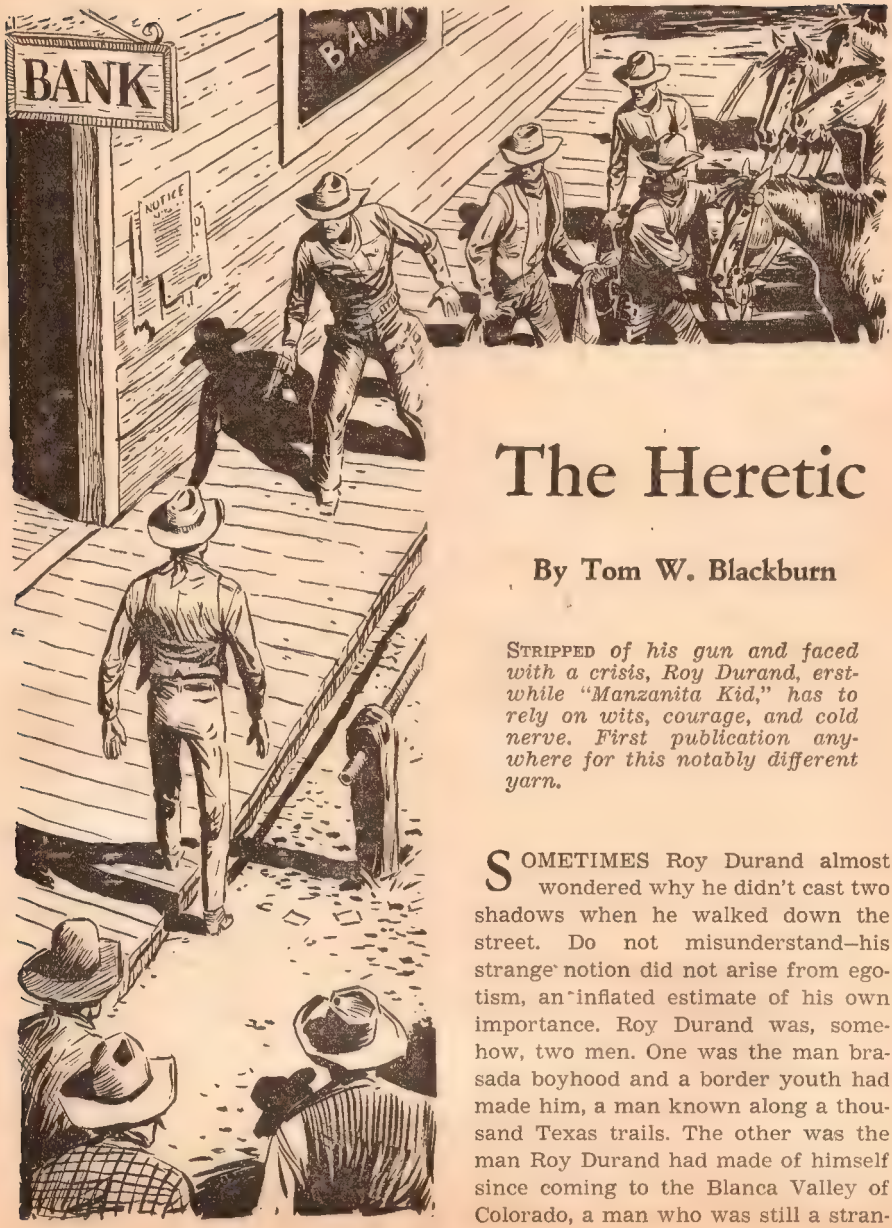
"Jim?"

"He'll be all right."

A sense of peace came to Kincaid, and he knew this was what he had been holding on for. So Hull had got his jump and grabbed a gun. He had fired those two shots and made them good. Kincaid knew the lad would live—he had too much to live for not to, though Peabody had managed a couple of telling shots before he dropped.

Then Norma Hull's voice said from a great distance, "Kincaid, you're fine—"

Kincaid smiled softly. He let go and was completely at peace as the black curtains joined slowly together. . . .



The Heretic

By Tom W. Blackburn

STRIPPED *of his gun and faced with a crisis, Roy Durand, erstwhile "Manzanita Kid," has to rely on wits, courage, and cold nerve. First publication anywhere for this notably different yarn.*

SOMETIMES Roy Durand almost wondered why he didn't cast two shadows when he walked down the street. Do not misunderstand—his strange notion did not arise from egotism, an inflated estimate of his own importance. Roy Durand was, somehow, two men. One was the man brasada boyhood and a border youth had made him, a man known along a thousand Texas trails. The other was the man Roy Durand had made of himself since coming to the Blanca Valley of Colorado, a man who was still a stran-

ger to the old Durand after eleven months of acquaintance.

Roy Durand had long ago learned the prime lesson of the open cattle country. There were four ways in which a man could get what he wanted; he could buy it, he could steal it, he could win it, or he could earn it. In Blanca Valley he had found something he wanted more than anything he had wanted in his life before—a girl. A girl he knew he could not buy, or steal, or win. A girl he knew he would have to earn.

It was because of this—because he wanted Jean Follett—that Roy Durand was two men in Blanca Valley when he had been one man in Texas. It was because of this that the gun by which Roy Durand had once lived lay with its shell belt in a shoe box on a closet shelf in the house Jean Follett shared with her merchant father. It was because of this that he was anchored to this valley, this land, and its people.

Dismounting at the rack before the Blanca Saloon, Durand fastened his reins with a quick wrap hitch and stepped up onto the walk. A hail from across the street halted him. He pulled up impatiently to wait.

Harry Odom crossed the street at a half-trot toward him. Odom was a fat, self-important little man with the troubles of the world upon his shoulders.

"This is luck, Roy," he said. "I was fixing to drive out to your place. Something I got to talk to you about."

Durand looked at the star on the fat man's vest and shook his head, with a strong feeling of satisfaction.

"You've got no business with me, Harry, and I've got none with you. Come in and I'll buy you a drink."

"The drink can wait," Odom said nervously. "I've got a satchelful of trouble, and I need help carrying it. I'm not buying every piece of gossip a man hears, or asking any questions—but because of where you've been and what you've seen, you can be a bigger help to me than any man in town. Roy, I want to deputize you."

Durand considered this. Jean Follett had insisted they wait a year before she decided whether she would marry Roy Durand. She had had a reason for specifying that wait. Her father had approved it, and he had had a reason for his approval. Gossip was not a thing a man could outrun—it was not something he could deny.

He looked at Harry Odom and felt sorry for the fat man. Harry believed that a man in gossip and a man in flesh were the same thing. Harry was wrong as hell. He did not know that Roy Durand was two men, and that the streets of Valley Center would see only one of them—the man Durand had created for Jean Follett.

"No, Harry," he said flatly. "I won't do it. Get somebody else."

"If Roy Durand won't take the job, who else will?" Odom protested. "Guy Tinglin and his bunch hit town this morning. Know what that means?"

Durand thought this over. The Blanca Valley was a long way from Tinglin's base of operations, but the man would work one place exactly as he would another. He knew Guy Tinglin—knew him well. They had shared a wary, friendly drink together more than once, and he understood how Tinglin and his wild bunch worked. He knew the raw danger in the man—the ruthlessness, the strength—and the weakness. He also understood the nervous sweat wilting Harry Odom's collar.

"Yes, Harry, I know," he said. "Tinglin and his boys will hang around. They'll pull the strongest bluff they can manage. If somebody backs down, they'll hit like a cat. It's been like that always."

"You know that, and you won't give me a hand?" Odom said, half angrily.

Durand smiled slightly. "A man would be a damned fool to pin on a star without a belt at his hips," he answered.

"And you won't buckle on a gun?" Odom said. "Is that it, Roy?"

"That's it," Durand agreed.

Odom swore under his breath, turned, and stalked off up the walk.

Men who had never ridden the lonesome trails did not understand those who did ride them. They did not know that the most notorious bandit who had ever ridden the brasada in the old days had been a kindly grandfather, supporting a horde of relatives with open-handed generosity between his raids. They did not know that the most dangerous killer the border had ever seen was a boy, so frightened that he lived in mortal terror—struggling constantly with a fear of darkness, of omens, of spirits, of other men, even of himself.

They did not understand that often the shell belts which looked so sinister were buckled across bellies flat with hunger. They did not understand that some men were born to handle a gun as others were born to dance, a skill which brought them no particular measure of either satisfaction or pride. They did not know that death rode oftenest beside those who did not wish to kill.

Durand found three strangers in the Blanca Saloon—lean, hard-eyed men, marked by feline friendlessness. Knowing the faces of none, Durand still knew they were Tinglin's men.

He pushed up to the bar a few paces from them and ordered a drink, speaking casually of the day's heat to the bartender. One of the strangers drifted down toward him, his eyes narrowed.

"Howdy, Manzanita," he said mockingly.

Durand turned a direct glance on him. "Your mistake, friend," he said.

"You wouldn't remember me," the other countered. "I was in Laredo the day you filled five coffins with one gun. I'd never forget the Manzanita Kid."

"A long memory is like a long fingernail," Durand said with a thin smile. "It can be troublesome. It ought to be kept trimmed."

The stranger's eyes ran over Durand's figure, lingering on his unbelted hips. "The boss told us to keep an eye out for you, Manzanita," he said. "Guy figured this might be your town."

"My name is Durand," Roy answered. "And Tinglin's right. This is my town. You tell him that."

"Sure," the rider agreed with a grin. "But I don't think it's going to worry him much—not after I tell him how you look."

"Tell him I said you boys are to be on the move by daybreak tomorrow. Tell him I said there's nothing here for him."

The man's grin widened. "Sure, Durand," he said. "That'll worry Guy a lot. He's scared to death of dogs with no teeth."

The man rejoined his companions. Durand finished his drink and left the Blanca. Angling across the street, he entered Jason Follett's store for a sack of tobacco. The merchant frowned anxiously at him.

"Harry see you, Roy?" he asked.

Durand nodded. "I turned him down, Follett," he said.

"Because Jean took your gun away?" the merchant asked.

"Because she wants the kind of man nobody could be, wrapped up in a shell belt, Follett," Durand answered bluntly.

"Odom can't stop Tinglin and his boys, and if they can't be stopped they'll clean the town out, Roy," Follett protested.

Durand shrugged. "I made a deal with Jean. I've kept it for eleven months. I'll keep it now. Tell her for me that I'll see her after supper."

He tossed a coin on the counter and left the store. The sun was low against the westward hills. Shadows were long on the street. Swinging into the barbershop, he washed his face and hands at a basin, combed his hair, and came once more onto the walk.

Fresh horses were at the hitch rail outside of the Blanca Saloon. Scarred, powerful, long-legged horses with warbags up across saddle cantles. The horses belonging to Tinglin's bunch, grouped here now on the street, ready for riding if riding became necessary. One of Tinglin's men was on the walk beside them. When Durand appeared on the walk, this man ducked into the saloon. A moment or two later, Guy Tinglin and the five who had ridden into Valley Center with him came out together, angling across the street. Durand put his back against a building front and waited for them.

Tinglin had not changed during the years since Durand had last seen the man. A quiet pantherishness and a wary sort of surety, acquired on the dark trails, were apparent in his manner. He stopped, facing Durand, with his men flanking him.

"I've got to know about you, Manzanita," Tinglin said, without preface. "You rode with our kind a time or two, and you rode a lot more with a star. You're a man who's hard to figure. I don't like a town with somebody like you in it."

"You got my message?" Durand asked sharply.

Tinglin nodded, with a faint, mirthless smile. "Dawn tomorrow, you said, Manzanita. That's good enough for us; we'll be through by then. Now, you think up a chore you left undone at your place outside of town. Think up a chore and get off the street for tonight, Manzanita. This isn't your town now. It's mine."

"And if I don't—?"

"I suppose they've got some law here," Tinglin said. "They must have—dead men have to be buried."

"We kept out of each other's way in the old days, Guy," Durand reminded.

The outlaw nodded. "You were a different boy in the old days," he said. "I never tackle a hill that I think is too steep. You've leveled off, Manzanita. You'd never have settled here if you hadn't. You'd never have taken off your gun. It's plain to see your shadow's got too short to shade anybody. You keep out of our way."

Tinglin turned and with his men moved briskly up the street to the only restaurant in town.

Durand moved on slowly to Jason Follett's store. He heard his name called sharply and looked up to see the merchant's daughter in the doorway. He paused on the lower step, looking up at her.

"Friends of yours, Roy?" she asked.

Durand shook his head slowly. "Not exactly. Some gents with the same idea you have, Jean—the idea that

a man can change his spots."

"What did they want?" the girl demanded, frowning.

"They wanted me out of town for tonight," he said quietly.

"And—are you going, Roy?"

"Will you go with me?" he asked. "Eleven months has been a long time to wait, Jean."

"Leave Valley Center when there's trouble brewing—when Dad might be in danger? Leave Mr. Odom, and the others? Are you crazy, Roy?"

"I don't know," Durand said slowly. "I'm beginning to think I might be—"

"You haven't answered me," the girl interrupted. "Are you going to get out of town?"

"No," Durand told her flatly.

"You promised me," the girl reminded him. "You promised me you'd change—that you'd make a new beginning here, and that you wouldn't get involved in any more trouble. I have your gun, Roy. Have you forgotten that?"

Durand shook his head again. "No," he said quietly. "I haven't forgotten anything, Jean. I've had a lot of time to think—a lot of time to remember—in the last eleven months. You keep the gun. There's some things a woman can't take away from a man."

The girl frowned uneasily. "Will I see you tonight?" she asked. "Dad said you were coming up to the house."

"I don't know," Durand told her. "I just don't know, Jean."

He moved on down the street. Harry Odom was slouched in deep dejection behind his desk in the marshal's office. Durand studied him frowningly for a moment before entering.

"I think Tinglin means business, Harry," he said. "I thought you ought to know. If I were you, I'd put guards on Follett's store and the bank—"

"Guards?" Harry Odom grunted bitterly. "Who in the hell would have sand enough in this town to stand against those killers if Roy Durand won't? I've already set some guards, but every last man will drop his gun the minute Tinglin looks at him. Valley Center will be bled to death by morning. If you'd stand with us, we might have a chance. In a thing like this men have got to have somebody to follow."

"I'll be around, Harry, if that means anything," Durand said.

Odom's eyes brightened. Kicking his chair back, he came to his feet and reached a belted gun down from a peg. He tossed this on the desk in front of Durand.

"I'll make you a loan of this iron, Roy. You're going to need it."

Durand shook his head curtly. "I've never worn a gun in Valley Center, Harry. I'm not going to wear one now."

"Be sensible, man! Take it!"

"No," Durand said. "If you want me, I'll be at the livery, or at Follett's store."

The livery was at the south end of Valley Center, the direction in which Guy Tinglin and his men must ride when they left the town. Roy Durand leaned against a stacked tier of grain sacks back in the darkening barn and waited with a patience which cost him strong effort.

To Harry Odom and the others who had heard the gossip drifting ahead of him up out of Texas, Durand was a gunman, and if Guy Tinglin and his men attempted to strip the town there would be work for a gunman tonight. The pleasantries and the friendships of the last eleven months were gone and forgotten. Like a doctor who would

not use his skill when needed, Durand would be scorned with bitterness now. There would be none in the town to pause for consideration of the compulsions stacked against him.

To Jean Follett, Durand was a man from a kind of life she had never known and which she was determined never to know. He was a strong man and a desirable one, but one whom she feared, and she was not a woman who could live with fear, for a day—or for a lifetime. Hunched on the grain sacks, Durand was thinking of the town of Valley Center. He was also thinking of the girl. Jean had been born and raised here. She loved the town and the valley as much as she hated all that made up the past of Roy Durand. She believed that a man could change, and that she was strong enough to change him.

These were things which would be incomprehensible to Guy Tinglin. He would see in Roy Durand only a hawk that had broken its wings—that and nothing else. He would see a man no longer entitled to either fear or respect. Shrewd and practiced in such things, he would recognize as fully as Harry Odom did that Valley Center could not stand without leadership against him. And, like Odom, he would realize that Roy Durand was the only possible leader for the town. It would be a simple thing to Tinglin—a lack of a belt about Durand's hips was proof of a lack of defense in the town itself. And there were some thousands of dollars in Jason Follett's safe and in the bank which could be carried out of Valley Center.

It fitted together like the bricks in a wall, yet the girl, and the town, and the outlaw from the south were all wrong. They did not know or understand that the events and skills which gave a man a name with a gun gave him other strengths also. They did not know or understand that a man might change the pattern of his living but that the old rules persisted—that there were certain things a man must always do, and that he could change only the ways in which they were to be done.

Time had moved well into evening. Durand had grown both restless and increasingly hungry. Near ten o'clock, the sleepy hum along Valley Center's main street was broken by the kind of sound for which he had been waiting—the sudden crash of falling glass, followed by the shouts of startled men and one shot, then abrupt, heavy silence.

Durand stepped onto the street. Tinglin's horses were bunched near the corner of Follett's store. One of Tinglin's men was holding them. Two more were spaced on the walk in front of the place, and Follett's front window—the largest one in the town—had been broken in. Tinglin and his two other companions were not in sight.

Harry Odom was coming up from the marshal's office at a fast, waddling trot, his gun in his hand. Three or four townsmen were well out in the street before the store, hands lifted shoulder-high, carefully clear of the weapons they wore, under the surveillance of the guns of the two Tinglin men on the walk. Another man, bareheaded and big of body, was running up the opposite walk, rapidly overtaking and passing Harry Odom. Some distance behind this man, also running at a fast, desperate stride, was yet another figure.

The big bareheaded man loped anglingly into the street toward the front of the store, and Durand recog-

nized Jason Follett. One of the Tinglin men on the walk let out a sharp warning at the merchant as he approached. Not breaking his stride, Follett lunged on.

The Tinglin man stepped a little aside and slapped a gun barrel against the old man's head as he reached him. Follett spilled on his face along the walk, skidding heavily against the front wall of the building.

Durand shifted from the walk, on which he had been moving, into the street, seeking the center of it and not hurrying his pace. He was still fifty yards from the store when Harry Odom came up before the building. One of the Tinglin men on the walk barked an order at Odom.

The fat man paused for an instant, seeming to look at the lowered gun in his hand and then at the townsmen with their hands abjectly up in the middle of the street. Very slowly, Odom let his weapon slip from his fingers. It made a small puff of dust when it hit the roadway. Odom backed, with a sidling motion, toward the other townsmen.

An instant later, there was the flash of an explosion within Follett's store, a grunt of concussion following to shake the buildings along the street. The figure which had been trailing Follett pulled up on the opposite walk, across from the store, and stood motionless for a moment.

Guy Tinglin and his two companions stepped back onto the walk through the broken window, carrying two small canvas bags with them. Tinglin callously prodded Follett's body.

"Up saddle, boys," he called to his men. "We're through here."

Durand had cut the distance between the group before the store and himself to twenty yards. He lifted his voice, cutting the night air incisively:

"Not quite, Guy. I told you this was my town. You should have listened."

Tinglin and his men wheeled as a unit. Strong moonlight lay against Durand where he stood in the open, so that it was obvious he was unarmed. But he did not stand as Harry Odom and the townsmen were standing—tense with nervous fear. He started forward again, advancing on Tinglin and his companions with an easy, swinging stride.

"Put down your iron, Guy—you and your boys," he said quietly. "Do that and you won't get hurt."

Tinglin and his men stared incredulously at Durand. From across the street, where the figure which had trailed Follett along the street had stopped, Jean Follett's voice rang out suddenly:

"Roy, don't be a fool! I've got your gun. It's here. I brought it—"

Durand ignored the girl, his eyes fixed on Guy Tinglin. "Put down your iron, Guy," he repeated. "I don't want to have to tell you again."

Durand took ten steps before Tinglin could convince himself that it was he who held the key to this situation, and not the man advancing toward him. He reached for his gun. An instant before it fired, Jean Follett's voice sang out again:

"Roy!"

Durand heard this. He felt the sound of Tinglin's first shot, the savage burn of his second. He staggered, but managed not to break his stride.

Tinglin flipped his weapon up again, barking a savage order to his companions: "Get the Kid!"

And at that instant, from across the street where Jean Follett stood, muzzle

flame blossomed. Hers was the marksmanship of a frightened girl, firing a heavy weapon by clamping both hands about its butt, eyes closed. The shot struck a Tinglin man ten feet from his boss, barely brushing the fellow, so that his outcry was of surprise rather than pain.

The shot drew the attention of Tinglin and his companions for a precious instant. In that instant, Harry Odom and the townsmen in the middle of the street, realizing Jean Follett would be the next target for Tinglin's gun, leaped into an action they could not take for themselves or their town. Guns began sweeping up from leather.

Still in that instant, Roy Durand launched himself in three long strides and a powerful leap, diving hard at Guy Tinglin's side. He hit the man heavily, bowling him over. He worked swiftly in the dust, using his knee, his elbow, and the heels of his hands. Tinglin struggled savagely, but Roy Durand had learned to be thorough in his years in the brasada.

Harry Odom, with a gun jerked hastily from the belt of a neighboring townsman, knocked down another Tinglin man. The other four, facing a dozen guns, dropped their irons.

Durand rose, withdrawing his knees from Tinglin's still conscious body. A flying form rocked against him, and soft hair was in his face. Jean Follett clung tightly to him.

"Roy! Roy— I shot a man," she said.

Durand nodded soberly. "It looks like I've made you my kind of woman instead of the other way around then, Jean," he told her.

The girl pushed back from him, her head coming up.

"I was always your kind of woman, Roy, and you were always my kind of man," she said. "Dad tried to tell me nearly a year ago, but I couldn't see it. There are some things that a man has to do—not because he is good or bad—but because they have to be done. Sometimes it is that way with a woman, too. I found that out tonight. I never again want to see what I watched you do tonight, Roy. I never want to see you go against a job without the tools to do it with. These men would have killed you."

"If you hadn't dumped a shot into them and scared that bunch out in the street to action, yes," Durand agreed soberly. "But not in the beginning. Men like Guy Tinglin—even the best of them—lay their lives out on a bluff. When a bigger bluff comes along, they don't know how to face it. At least, they don't know soon enough. That was the thing I had to play. You hadn't left me much else."

Jean pulled at his arm. "Roy, you're hurt. Let's get into the store, where I can take care of it."

They moved toward the walk and the broken front window of Follett's place. Other townsmen had appeared on the street. Some of them had Follett up between them. The merchant was swearing with spirit and dabbing at a long cut over one ear. Odom bustled past, prodding ahead the four Tinglin men who were still on their feet, in the direction of the jail. He spoke to Durand over his shoulder:

"Roy, you've got an apology and a drink coming at my expense the minute these coyotes are locked up."

Durand felt the touch of Jean Follett's hand upon his arm. He saw admiration in eyes where there had been hostility. A pinch-faced townswoman who had shunned him and avoided speaking to him since his arrival at

Valley Center rushed up to him effusively as he stepped into Follett's store.

"That was the bravest thing I ever saw in my life, Mr. Durand," she said.

Jean Follett shouldered her away, but her words remained in Durand's mind. There was no justice for a man with a gun. He was distrusted and hated for the things he did and had done. And yet, out of an instant of flame and violence had come a change so that the same people would offer him respect and admiration for exactly the same thing.

A man who lived with a gun could know no peace and no security, not out of fear of death at the hands of others, but because he could not know from one day to the next in what light his friends and neighbors and others even closer to him would hold him.

In her free hand Jean Follett was carrying his belt and gun, which she had brought, running up the street, from the box in her closet—the gun which she had fired blindly in Tinglin's direction. Durand gently disengaged the belt from her fingers and called after Harry Odom:

"Here, Harry—take this along and hang it on a peg in your office. Maybe somebody will want to borrow it some day. I'll have no more use for it."

He tossed the belt and weapon. Turning, Odom caught it, his eyes blinking roundly in surprise and puzzlement. Durand looked down at the girl beside him. Her eyes were also round, but he saw that she understood, and this was sufficient.

She would set no more trials for him. She would make no more rules. She would believe in him and in his beliefs, and what he had been would no longer make a difference with her—only what he was and what they could be together.

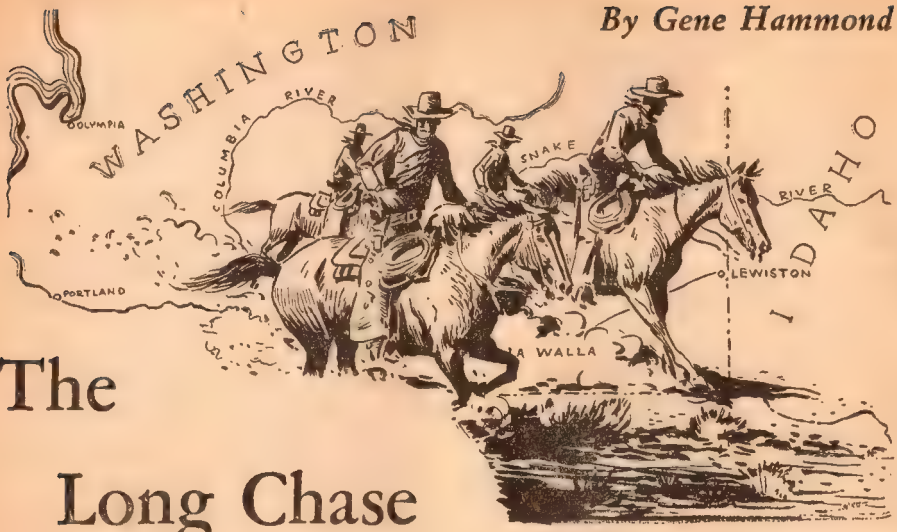
AROUND A MINING CAMP

A Western Quiz

HERE's a quiz that no doubt will be easy meat for anyone who's had experience in mining, though it may prove quite a chunk to chew for others (it was for the editors!). Still, it's one way of learning— In the left-hand column below is a list of terms familiar to 'most any miner. Just match them with the correct definitions in the right-hand column. Five right will pass anyone but a miner; from there on up you can write your own ticket as far as praise is concerned. Answers on page 159.

1. Giraffe	_____Opening running along the course of a vein
2. Bonanza	_____Pulverized ore that escapes from a wet-process mill
3. Pinch	_____Barren rock
4. Borrasca	_____Non-ore-bearing rock around a vein
5. Winze	_____Well sunk beneath a shaft to hold water
6. Country rock	_____Thinning of a vein
7. Sump	_____Large body of rich ore
8. Grizzlies	_____Ore-hauling car running on inclined track
9. Tailings	_____Small ventilating shaft between levels
10. Drift	_____Iron bars serving as screen at bottom of ore chute

By Gene Hammond



The Long Chase

"INTUITION" is not confined to the female of the species—as is proved in this factual account of a brutal gold-fields murder and its exciting aftermath, written especially for ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE.

LOYD MAGRUDER didn't have a ghost of a chance. One minute he was drawing on his pipe comfortably as he gazed into the flickering embers of the campfire; the next minute he was sprawled out on the ground, a jagged ax blade buried deep in his skull. Magruder, the trader—Magruder, the honest man that everybody knew and liked—was dead, his brains spilled out on the dank, shadowy earth at his murderer's feet.

Without so much as a second glance at Magruder, the killer whirled, ax in hand, and crept toward the four men that still slumbered a few yards back from the fire. Approaching them, he was joined by three companions who had been lying in wait nearby. He stood for a moment staring down at the hapless sleepers. The wavering yellow firelight playing across his face illuminated a sneer on his lips. He stepped forward and brought his ax down a second time.

As he withdrew the spattered weapon, a gun roared at his side. One of the sleeping men, half-risen in his blankets, slumped back riddled with buckshot. Swinging his hatchet high in the air, Magruder's murderer lunged toward his third victim. At the same instant another of the killers leaped forward and drove a long bowie knife into the throat of the one remaining sleep-

er. The slaughter was complete. Five men had died in half as many minutes, and no word had been spoken.

A bitter wind howled through the camp site. In its wake came snow—great white flakes that swirled among the crags and settled wetly on the faces of those who had just died. The night was dark and the murderers hastened to pile fresh logs on the fire.

While the solitary blaze flamed up deep within the wilderness of the Bitter Root Mountains on the present Idaho-Montana border, a man tossed uneasily in his bed at the settlement of Lewiston, on the Snake River some one hundred fifty miles to the west. It was a chilly October night in 1863 and Hill Beachy, proprietor of the best hotel in Lewiston and owner of the local stage line, was going through another of his "premonitions" that all was not well with his friend, Lloyd Magruder.

Nearly three months earlier, when Magruder had stopped by the hotel to say that he was heading east for Bannack and Virginia City (then in Idaho Territory, now in Montana) to sell a recently arrived shipment of miners' supplies, Beachy had experienced his first "premonition" that the journey boded no good for his friend.

He had warned Magruder at the time but, as his fears were based on nothing more concrete than a manifestation of Magruder's death which had come to him in a dream, Beachy was unable to persuade his friend to cancel the trip. The trader stood to make upward of $30,000 by his transactions with the miners, and it would have taken considerably more than a mere dream to stop him. In the end Beachy had given Magruder his best revolver, wished him Godspeed, and settled back doubtfully to await his return.

After a few weeks, Magruder's wife had received a letter from her husband in Virginia City, in which he spoke enthusiastically of his trading venture and closed with a promise to return to Lewiston before the first snow fell. All was going well, it seemed. Nevertheless, Hill Beachy could not get the dream from his mind. The trip back from Virginia City was a long and lonely one, and Magruder would be carrying with him all the profits of his business venture. Beachy was unable to share the confidence of the other townspeople as to his friend's safety. For the sake of Magruder's wife, however, Beachy refrained from voicing his doubts in public.

Then one night, a few days after his latest "premonition," Beachy remained at the stage office very late. When he finally returned home there was a heart-sick look on his face.

"I was right, Maggie! By the gods, I was right!"

His wife turned over drowsily and gazed up at him from the bed. "What in tarnation are you doin' out so late, Hill?" she demanded. "And what was you 'right' about, anyhow?"

"About Lloyd's death," Beachy replied, sinking onto the edge of the bed. "He's been killed, Maggie. I always said he'd never come back from Virginia City alive, and now I know I'm right." He shook his head dejectedly.

His wife sat up in bed, fully awakened by her husband's words. "What do you mean, Hill?" She reached out and put a hand on his sleeve. "Who says Lloyd's been killed?"

"Nobody says it, Maggie. I just know it's true now, that's all." He stood up and began pacing the floor. "Tonight while I was workin' on the books at

the stage office, four men came in and bought tickets for Walla Walla. I thought there was something fishy about them, the way they kept themselves all bundled up, so's a body couldn't get a decent look at their faces. Then, when one of 'em said his name was Smith, and the three others claimed to be brothers named Jones, I knew they weren't honest men."

Beachy paused and turned to face his wife. "I slipped out the back way and followed 'em to their lodgings, Maggie. When a light came on in a front room, I crept up close and peeked through the shutters." He stopped, shaking his head sadly. "Poor old Lloyd," he muttered.

"Who was it, Hill?" demanded his wife. "Could you tell who the men was?"

Beachy nodded. "Doc Howard, Chris Lowry, Jim Romaine, and some other rascal I've never seen before."

"But Hill," began his wife; "I don't see—"

"Don't see what they had to do with Lloyd?" His laugh was short and bitter. "Those scoundrels left Lewiston the day after Lloyd did. They said they was headin' for Oregon, but I know now that they sneaked around somehow and ambushed poor Lloyd on his way home."

"Stuff and nonsense," exclaimed his wife in a relieved tone. "I thought for a while maybe something really had happened." She sank back into bed. "You've been thinkin' about that dream of yours too much, Hill. Seein' those men back here ain't no sign that they ever did no such thing."

"But Maggie, they've got dust with 'em. Lots of dust. Probably Lloyd's dust that they took from him after they killed him!"

Beachy's wife yawned noisily. "Come on to bed, Hill. It's late, and you're just gettin' all upset over nothing."

"Nothin', is it?" His tone was harsh. "You wait and see, Maggie. Time'll prove who's right."

Hill Beachy tossed and turned for hours that night before sleep finally came. No one would listen. Not even Maggie believed him. Earlier that evening, he had told his suspicions to the local judge and suggested that they get the sheriff to go over and arrest the murderers right away, before they had a chance to get out of town. In the beginning the judge had tried to reason with him. Later he had become impatient at Beachy's persistence.

"Mrs. Magruder told me only last night that she didn't expect her husband for ten days yet," he said finally. "Let's wait and see whether he comes home or not."

Beachy had pointed out that the murderers would be a long way away by that time, but the judge had just stood there shaking his head and saying it would be better to wait.

Beachy turned and buried his face in the pillow. If nobody else was going to do anything about it, he'd have to dig out proof of the murder himself.

The following morning, after delegating his work at the hotel to his wife and turning the stage office over to a clerk, Hill Beachy began an earnest search for the horses that Howard, Lowry, Romaine, and Co. had used to reach Lewiston. As the men had departed on the westbound stage by now, their animals must be somewhere in the neighborhood. Perhaps through the identification of these as having come from Magruder's train, he might still convince the judge before it was too late.

Meeting opposition and ridicule at every turn, Beachy carried on his search without success. The animals that had brought the men to Lewiston seemed to have vanished into thin air. On the third day after the departure of the stage, a mule train arrived from Virginia City with news that Magruder had completed his business and left the mining settlement four days ahead of them. The muleteers were surprised that he had not yet arrived, as he had told them that he was going to travel right through in order to surprise his wife, who was not expecting him home for another week.

Beachy, now more certain than ever that his friend had been the victim of foul play, still could not convince the citizens of Lewiston. When the leader of the mule train mentioned that they had met heavy snows during the passage through the Bitter Root Mountains, the people all nodded and said that Magruder, running into a storm, had doubtless turned south to Salt Lake. He'd be along any day now, safe and sound.

Hiding his anger, Beachy resumed his search for the horses. A few days later, he and another man made a hasty trip into the mountains to investigate a party of four men said to be camped in an isolated spot some distance off the regular trail.

For several hours, during which the two horsemen wound their way through the tortuous mountain passes in the face of a biting wind, Beachy sincerely believed that they were going to find the four scoundrels who had boarded the stage a week earlier. For some reason known only to themselves, he reasoned, they had circled back and were hiding in the hills. When it was discovered that the party was no more than a group of innocent miners out on a hunting trip, Beachy returned to Lewiston bitterly disappointed.

The following day, his luck changed. At a near-by ranch he stumbled onto a horse, several mules, and an assortment of saddles and bridles that had been left behind by the four men. Bringing these into town, he went directly to the house of an Indian youth who had been employed by Magruder just before his departure for Virginia City.

"That's Mr. Magruder's saddle, all right," said the boy, pointing to a small mend on the crupper. "I repaired this rip myself only a few days before he left Lewiston!"

A day later one of the members of a party newly arrived from Virginia City identified the horse as one that he had seen Magruder riding in the mining camp.

Armed with these new bits of evidence, Hill Beachy visited the Governor of Idaho Territory, then in Lewiston, and obtained authority to go after the suspected murderers and bring them back for trial. Accompanied by Tom Pike, the man who had gone with him on his futile ride into the hills a few days earlier, Beachy set out at once in a special coach for Walla Walla.

After an arduous day on the road, during which horses were changed three times and carriages twice, the two men arrived at Walla Walla. Once there, Beachy lost no time searching out a friend who might provide them with information.

"Yes," said the man when Beachy questioned him, "they were here several days. Lost quite a bit of money on the faro tables, as I remember it. Mmmm. Let's see. They must've left

about four days ago. Said they were going to Portland and catch the first boat for San Francisco."

Thanking the man, Beachy contacted the agent of the Columbia River Steamboat Company and made arrangements for river transportation onward from Wallula, a settlement some thirty miles to the west. Then, through another friend, he was able to borrow a buggy for the midnight drive to Wallula.

Daybreak found Beachy and his companion thundering onto a landing-wharf at the edge of the swollen Columbia River. Although informed that, because of high water, all navigation down the river had been suspended indefinitely, Beachy was able to convince one of the steamboat-company pilots of the urgency of his mission. After a moment's consideration, this captain said he was willing to attempt the dangerous journey through the rapids to Umatilla in a Whitehall boat, so long as Beachy and his friend realized the chance they would be taking and agreed not to hold him responsible if anything happened.

Three hours later, considerably shaken up but still all in one piece, the small boat and its three occupants eased up to the dock at Umatilla. With a hasty word of thanks to their pilot, Beachy and Pike leaped ashore and made their way aboard a river steamer that was discharging its cargo nearby.

Searching out the captain, Beachy presented him with a letter from the agent at Walla Walla which said, in part, *It is requested that everything humanly possible be done to expedite the rapid transporting of the bearer, Hill Beachy, and his aide, to Portland. Theirs is a mission of utmost urgency.*

Obtaining the captain's promise of full co-operation, Beachy hired an additional crew of men from the town to speed up unloading operations. Within a few hours, the job was completed and the vessel set out.

That evening, after an uneventful day on the river, Beachy and Pike arrived at Celilo, eighty-five miles farther along on their journey. Here again it appeared that they would be delayed. A short distance west of Celilo there were a series of rapids which, under the present turbulent river conditions, were said to be totally impassable. The local train by which the journey around the rapids was normally made did not depart until the following day. Refusing to be daunted, Beachy rented a pair of horses and, together with Tom Pike, galloped westward into the gathering dusk.

The two men arrived at Dalles City, a river town from which regular steamers sailed to Portland, shortly after midnight. Prowling through the saloons along the waterfront, Beachy ascertained that the four men they were pursuing had left Dalles City for Portland only forty-eight hours earlier. The chase was narrowing down.

Without so much as a pause for rest, Beachy and Pike boarded a steamer for Portland. When they reached that city, Beachy was disgruntled to find that Magruder's murderers had sailed out for San Francisco on the previous day. Dispatching Pike to Astoria, the Oregon seaport at the mouth of the Columbia River, in case the fugitives should disembark there, Beachy determined to find out for certain the plans of the fleeing men before traveling further.

Through a youth he had encountered in Lewiston some weeks earlier, Beachy knew the name of a man in

Portland who had served as an accomplice to Doc Howard in a previous crime. Disguising himself in the clothes of a waterfront hoodlum, Beachy made his way to the boarding-house where this man lived.

"I'm a friend of Doc Howard's," he explained gruffly when he was admitted. "Just got into town from Boise, and I'm tryin' to locate Doc and the rest of the boys. He told me once that if I was ever in Portland, you'd probably be able to put me on his trail."

"Doc and his boys just come from Boise themselves," said the man suspiciously. "How come you wasn't with 'em?"

Beachy was ready for this. Back in Walla Walla, he had heard that the fugitives were telling everyone that they had left Boise a few days earlier after a brawl with some miners. "Yeah," he said, "I know. I was supposed to be with 'em, but a sheriff thought different." He shrugged. "Took me a few days to make him see it my way."

This seemed to satisfy the man. "Doc left for 'Frisco yestidy," he said. "Reckon he'll be there a spell. Gonna have some dust coined at the mint, and then take off for the East."

That was all Beachy wanted to know. Leaving the man, he returned to his hotel to decide on the next move. When he discovered that there was no California-bound steamer scheduled to leave Portland for at least ten days, he concluded that the dreary seven-hundred-mile overland journey by Concord coach was his only alternative. Ascertaining that a partially empty coach had left Portland for the trek south on the previous morning, he hired a buggy and set out alone at midnight to overtake it.

Pounding into Salem, Oregon, late the following afternoon, he was overjoyed to see the coach halted before the local stage office. After making arrangements for the return of the rented buggy to Portland, Beachy boarded the coach and settled back for a much-needed rest.

Within a few hours, however, impatience got the better of him. Always foremost in his mind was the fear that the fugitives might complete their business in San Francisco and sail out for the East Coast before he arrived. Thus it was that before the stage had carried him many miles beyond Salem, he hailed the driver and asked to be put off at the entrance to a ranch which they were then passing.

After explaining his predicament to the ranch owner, he borrowed a fast horse and thundered southward, leaving the lumbering coach far behind. It was now his plan to overtake the stage that had departed from Portland a day earlier, thus hastening by a full twenty-four hours his arrival at Yreka, California, from where he could telegraph to San Francisco.

Unfortunately, Beachy had failed to consider his own weakened physical condition. Having been on the move almost constantly since his departure from Lewiston four days previously, his endurance had all but run out. As his mount ate up the dusty miles, a great weariness settled over him. His head dropped to his chest and he fell into a deep sleep. Only because riding was second nature to him did he subconsciously maintain his balance in the saddle, despite being totally unaware of his surroundings.

When Beachy awakened with a jolt some time later, he was dismayed to discover that during his sleep the horse

had turned about and returned to its home stables. Still sitting in the saddle, Beachy glared bitterly at the very gates through which he had ridden forth so confidently several hours earlier!

Once more hiring a buggy, he set out in pursuit of the coach he had scorned as being too slow. About midmorning he sighted the trailing dust of the stage's wheels and in a short while had rejoined his companions of the previous afternoon. Two days later he arrived at Yreka.

About twenty miles south of the Oregon border, this bustling California village marked the northernmost point of the telegraph cable. From here, Beachy dispatched a detailed message to the chief of police in San Francisco, asking that the four fugitives be traced down and taken into custody. The following day a telegram handed to him by the station agent at Shasta informed him that the men he wanted were already in jail on a minor charge, and would be held until he arrived.

When Hill Beachy faced the prisoners at City Jail a few days later, they were a very worried foursome. Until the instant that he walked into their cell, none of them had any idea they were being held as suspects in the Magruder killing. They recovered quickly from the shock of seeing Beachy in San Francisco, however, and were vehement in their denial of any knowledge of the murder.

Despite their statements that they had last seen Magruder, hale and hearty, at Bannack several weeks before he was scheduled to leave for home, Beachy's evidence was sufficiently damning that the California Supreme Court agreed to surrender the men to the Idaho authorities for trial.

Accompanied once more by his friend, Tom Pike, who had arrived by steamer from Astoria, Beachy set out on the long trip back to Lewiston with the four prisoners in irons. The group was met at Astoria by a detachment of government troops who served as escort guards for the remainder of the journey.

Because of the detailed confession of Tom Page, the fourth member of the gang, who had been an unwilling witness to the slaughter in the Bitter Root Mountains and had been forced to accompany the killers in their flight, an air-tight case was presented to the jury. After the conviction of the three murderers on January 24, 1864, Page, who had been released for turning state's evidence, escorted a party of Magruder's friends to the site of the massacre.

At the base of a near-by cliff were found the remains of the five men who had been killed, still bound in the blankets in which they had been thrown off the precipice. Near by, another blanket contained buttons, belt buckles, watches, and other metal objects which the murderers had been unable to destroy in the campfire.

As Page explained it, the three men had planned to do away with Magruder from the outset. Beachy had guessed correctly when he told his wife that he thought the men had left Lewiston the day after Magruder's departure to overtake and kill him. However, even he had not imagined that Howard, Lowry, and Romaine would be clever enough to join up with Magruder's party on the journey east, thus putting themselves in a position of confidence for the return trip.

At first, Page said, the men were going to eliminate Magruder on the trip east, taking over the mining supplies

themselves. Then they decided it would be much easier to let the trader sell his supplies first, and then kill him and take his dust on the return journey.

Throughout his early talks with Beachy at San Francisco, and later during the trial, Tom Page stoutly maintained that he had known nothing of the murderous schemes of his companions until just a few minutes before Magruder's death. It had been too late then for him to do anything about it.

With the hanging of Doc Howard, Chris Lowry, and Jim Romaine on March 4, 1864, the initial session of the First District Court in Idaho Territory had gotten off to a fine start. Because of the swift justice dealt out to these killers, Idaho's newly formed body of lawmakers found themselves in the enviable position of having gained the full support of the population. In the years that followed, later sessions made good use of that support to punish those who, like the killers of Lloyd Magruder, flouted the law for their own personal gain.

POKER—FRONTIER STYLE

BACK in the 'eighties Jicarilla Bob operated a saloon just outside the Indian Reservation near the border between Colorado and New Mexico. There was a poker game in progress. Four lynx-eyed men faced each other across the green-topped table. The cards were dealt, bets made and called, and hands spread on the table for the showdown. Pop Williams displayed three aces and Potter Abert two. It was decided, since five aces are not natural to poker, to leave the pot and deal a new hand. The extra ace was torn up. The cards were dealt again and bets made, until the pot became a sizeable one. Hands were spread again on the table. In a flash, Pop Williams's gun roared and Potter Abert slumped to the floor.

On inspection, Abert's hand was found to contain three aces while Williams held two. Since Abert held more aces, but was "out," Williams, on the strength of his two aces, reached over to pull in the pot. But Abert was of the stuff that made the West. He pushed his bullet-slugged body up high enough to get his gun over the edge of the table and drilled Williams "plumb center." Seeing things shape up as they did, Jicarilla Bob claimed the pot for the house and emphasized his remarks from behind two six-shooters. There were no contestants as he raked in the pot.

At the inquest the bodies of the deceased were inspected. Abert was found to have an extra ace in his pocket and Williams had two extras in his belt.

The two were buried in boot hill, with *3 Aces* scrawled on Abert's rude headboard, and *2 Aces* on Williams's.

—R. A. CRIDER

Cupid Can Be Stupid

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

YESSIR, the first time Justin Other Smith clamps his eyes on this luscious lass from deep in Dixie, ol' Cupid had him corralled in a corner an' hog-tied for brandin'.

Her name was Magnolia Malarkey, accordin' to what was writ on the big hosshide trunk, all plastered with hotel stickers, which the Wells-Fargo driver unloaded from the stage boot. Apache's whittle 'n' spit club was holding a meeting on the station porch when Magnolia stepped outten the Concord, and her appearance started a big rash of mustache-wipin' and bandanna-neckerchief-adjustin', the like of which you never seed.

This Magnolia filly was a peachy looker, no denyin' that. She had frizzled bangs and a pert little nose and a hour-glass figger that made Jim Groot take another look at his ever-lovin' wife, Hernia, and go on a drunk that night.

She looked as cute an' helpless as a leppie calf bogged down in a mud wal-

A "Paintin' Pistoleer" Yarn

YES, and so can Justin Other Smith where a gorgeous female is concerned—at least temporarily. Apache's dead-shot da Vinci shows he's only human when he tangles with the love bug. A ZGWM original.

ler, a-standin' there so shy in her frills an' finery, an' there warn't a male hombre in that crowd who wouldn't have been stirrup-drug through the portals of perdition for a chance to of helped her git wherever she was goin'.

Magnolia swells up them gorgeous lungs of hern with a drag of Arizona ozone, and says timid-like to nobody in partiklar, "So my dream has come true at last! Here I am in Apache, the home town of the greatest painter in all America, Justin O. Smith. Do any of you kind gentlemen happen to know that celebrity of the art world?"

Well, matter of fact, Justin O. was right there in the foreground, his eyes buggin' out over his cheekbones as he sized up her lovely lines from an artist's p'int of view.

Lew Pirtle, the Overland Telegraph agent, he gives Justin a shove and sings out envious-like, "This is him, ma'am. Around 'Pache we calls him the Paintin' Pistoleer, though, on account of him bein' the champeen pistol shot of the hull Territory."

Well, Magnolia turns her big innocent blue eyes around to oggle Smith, who is pawin' the dust with his boot toe and grinnin' as bashful as a barefoot kid askin' a gal if he can carry her books home from school. Her teeth flash out in a smile that stiffens the Paintin' Pistoleer like a sage hen bein' charmed by a bull snake, and when she had him himpmatized good and thorough, she says in a voice that reminded everybody present of blackstrap molasses dribblin' out of a jug:

"So *you* are Mistuh Smith! Ah have admired yo' Western paintings for yeahs, suh. Y'all look like a chivalrous man as well as a famous artist. Would y'all be so kind and condescending as to help poor little me carry her luggage?"

It taken another kick in the rump by Lew Pirtle to budge Smith out of his transom. He warn't exactly shiverless right then.

"Uh—de-lighted, ma'am, I'm shore," the Paintin' Pistoleer stammers out. He prances over and fixes to pick up her trunk, which same must have been packed with hoss shoes and old anvils from the way his knees buckled before he h'isted it to his shoulder.

"Where would you be going, ma'am?" he puffs out, purple in the face. "The Cowboy's Rest is the only lodgin's in town—"

Magnolia reaches down to where Justin O. is bent over so steep his nose is draggin' dust, and slips her cute little gloved hand under his elbow. Smith tries to straighten up, and his backbone give off with a noise like a marble rollin' acrost a xylophone, the weight of her trunk was that fierce.

"My Auntie Prunella Peebles and I," she twitters in her mockingbird trill, "have come to Apache for a summer's rest. We have leased the old Snodgrass Mansion, if y'all know where that is."

Smith knowed where the Snodgrass

Mansion was, all right. Same being a run-down three-story brick eyesore with an iron-railed cupola on top, setting on the hill back of the munisipple garbage dump. It had been built by Old Man Snodgrass, the loco prospector who discovered the Sacatone silver lodes in '72, and who was worth a cool million before he drunk hisself to death a few years back. Since then his mansion has been boarded up.

Ifn Smith had had his brains about him, he would have fetched his palomino saddler over from the stable to tote Miss Magnolia Malarkey as well as her trunk, but the poor walloper was too messmerized to think of other means of transport. Magnolia's fluttering eyes and honeysuckle voice had him petrified solid from the eyebrows north.

It was a pitiful spectacle, the Paintin' Pistoleer staggerin' off down the street bent double under that trunk, but there wasn't a soul who wore pants that wouldn't have traded places with him. At any rate, Smith was spared the shock the others got when the filly's aunt, Miss Prunella Peebles, stepped out of the stage.

The rest of the boys seen right off that Magnolia was no pat hand, if a joker like her Aunt Prunella went with the deal.

She stood around six foot, with skin like dried boot leather and a jaw you could have plowed hardpan with. She had a fuzzy mustache, and beady eyes that glittered like nail heads in a coffin lid. Her face would have looked a sight more nacheral with a split-ear halter, hangin' over a manger chompin' oats.

Ordinary, Justin O. couldn't of made it to the Snodgrass Mansion under his own steam, packin' that freight. But love hath charms, as the feller says, and he was plainly under the influence. Ever step of the way up the hill past the garbage dump, Magnolia was cooing in his ear about how she had been in love with all the magazine covers and calendars and other pitchers he had painted, and she had chosen 'Pache for her summer vacation in the hopes she would get to meet her idol.

When he finally made it to the porch of the Snodgrass Mansion, the Paintin' Pistoleer collapses on top of the trunk. He would have straightened up, only he couldn't unkink his back. So he pertends he's givin' Auntie Prunella a deep bow when Magnolia interdooces this she-blister who had been trailing them.

Auntie Prunella gives a whinnying noise through her nose and produces a key from her muff which opens the front door.

"Y'all are mighty sweet," Magnolia drools, giving Smith's nigh ear a playful tweek. "Now, if y'all will be kind enough to locate a scrubwoman to do some housecleaning for us, Auntie and I will be much obliged to you, kind suh."

Auntie Prunella reaches for the trunk, grabs it by one handle, and flips it over her shoulder like it contained a feather.

"If this young whippersnapper has any sense of courtesy," Prunella sniffs, "he will volunteer to help us straighten out this filthy hole himself, honeychile."

Needles to say, the Paintin' Pistoleer spent the rest of that horrible day sweepin' an' scrubbin' and windowcleanin', and when he finally shows up on Main Street that evenin' his tongue was hangin' out a foot and his boots was draggin' furrows in the dust. He had dishpan hands, housemaid's knee,

and an empty belly.

Feelin' the need of nourishment after this labor of love, the Paintin' Pistoleer lurches into the Bloated Goat Saloon and orders a dram of buttermilk. All the boys was in there roundsiding, as usual, and when they seen how bad Smith was stove up, Curly Bill Grane the bartender says anxious-like:

"Them she-males gang up on you in that ha'nted house, Justin? You look like you been wrasslin' with a carload o' brimmer bulls."

Smith just pulls in a deep breath, wipes the slobbers offn his chin, and rolls his eyes toward the ceilin'.

"She's gorgeous, boys," he says, in an exstatic voice like a drunk with delirium trimmings. "A veritable Venus. A nymph from New O'leans. Ethereal. Flawless. And innocent to boot. Never seen a woman who could hold a candle to my Maggie."

"Yore Maggie!" snorts Sol Fishman, who runs the O. K. Mercantile. "By Jupiter, son, you're in bad shape. Ifn Doc Grubb was sober I'd recommend you seein' him for a complete fizzical check-up. You better let me sell you a dose of spring tonic."

Smith's hat falls to the floor when he swigs the last of his buttermilk. He bends down, flips his cigarette stub into the Stetson, and claps Curly Bill's brass cuspidor over his head, which was luckily empty at the time. The cuspidor, that is, not his head. Well, come to think of it, the description fits both objects, at that.

"Miss Malarkey is a famous New York actress," Justin O. goes on, his mind a million miles away from the saloon—or up on Snodgrass Hill, to be exact. "She portrays ingénue rôles."

"Whatever kind of an en-gine she is," remarks Sheriff Rimfire Cudd, "she's shore rollin' you forty ways from the jack."

Smith ignores the sheriff. "She's resting up for her fall and winter engagements," he says. "Which means that for three solid months, Apache will be blessed with her presence. Boys, I'm a lucky man. Magnolia has asked me to dine at the mansion tomorrow night. Just think—I'll be supping at the same board with the toast of Broadway!"

Sol Fishman, who thinks a heap of Justin O., waggles his head sorrowful-like, realizing the Paintin' Pistoleer has jumped the track and is in need of a strait jacket pronto.

"How about that ganted old mudhen who's sharin' this gal's roost?" Sol wants to know. "I wouldn't enjoy eatin' no Broadway toast or any other vittles, with my feet under the same table with that bile-complected bag of bones."

Smith looks insulky at this. "Auntie Prunella," he says huffy, "come along as Magnolia's chaperone. And don't any of you sports git any ideas of serenading Magnolia under her window some balmy evening. Auntie Prunella squashed a rat runnin' up a rafter this afternoon with a doorknob she yanked out by the roots. And that Snodgrass place has a heap of doorknobs left for ammunition." He sighs. "I know, because I polished sixty-seven of 'em."

Well, up to now the Paintin' Pistoleer has made hisself a perty decent livin' sellin' his art work. Like Magnolia said, he was on his way to bein' a nationwide celebrity. But the next day, when a delegation consisting of Sheriff Cudd and Lawyer Plato X. Scrounge called at his studio upstairs over the Longhorn Saddle Shop, they seen that Smith's talent was sleddin' down the greased skids toward a bankrupture.

"What in tarnation is *that* supposed to repersent?" Scrounge blurts out, sizing up the canvas Smith is workin' on. It had started out to be a buckaroo forkin' a wild bronc at a rodeo, but you'd never know it to look at it now.

"This painting is entitled *Ride 'em Cowboy*," Smith says. "It has been contracted for by a Denver bootery for their forthcoming cowboy catalog. The five hundred smackers it will fetch is goin' to buy a pearl necklace for my Maggie."

Well, that daub could just as well have been called *A Ripe Eggplant Spilling out of a Skillet*. The horse was purple with green tail and mane, and the sky in the background had a big cloud floatin' acrost it that was the spittin' image of Magnolia Malarkey's face, and the cowboy had three arms already that Scrounge and the sheriff could count, with another one bein' sketched in.

"We come to remind you," the sheriff says polite-like, "that the hull community is waitin' down behind the Busted Flush Dance Hall to see you win yore shootin' match with that pesky drummer from Phoenix. Or had you forgot that you assepted a challenge to a public exhibition of target-shootin' for today?"

Well, it had slipped Smith's mind, all right. This drummer, a cocky galoot name of Fleegleheimer, was canvassin' the Territory representin' a line of ammunition for a wholesale house in Omaha. The minute he hit 'Pache, a couple days back, he began braggin' that there wasn't a rannihan west of the Pecos who could out-shoot him, and he backed his claim with legally tender dinero.

Nacheral, this Fleegleheimer hadn't heard of the Paintin' Pistoleer, or he would never have done his boastin' in 'Pache, of all places. So the Bloated Goat crowd, playin' him for a sucker, got their bets down in advance, each one covered by Fleegleheimer. Sol Fishman, his retail agent, was holding the stakes.

When Smith got down to the target range, totin' his famous .32 Colt on a .45 frame, everybody in town was hangin' on the corral fence behind the dance hall, waitin' to see Fleegleheimer get massacreed. The target was a printed bull's-eye bearin' Fleegleheimer's advertisement, and was set up agin a bale of alfalfy hay about ninety foot from the back steps of the Busted Flush, where the contestants was to stand.

Fleegleheimer, a fat dude in a derby and checkered pants, he shakes hands with Smith and they tossed a coin for first shots. The drummer won. Using a double-action Remington .44 and his own line of ammunition, this drummer chalks up four bull's-eyes out of his five shots, and he steps down off the porch feelin' perty spry.

"I scored 80 out of a possible 100, Smith," he rubs it in. "Let's see you top that."

The audience, they rub their hands together and start grinnin' like a pack of boar apes, already figgerin' out what they'd spend the money on they'd win from Fleegleheimer. A target match like this was duck soup for the Paintin' Pistoleer, as any fool would have knowed except a stranger from outside the Territory.

Well, Smith twirls his .32 absent-minded around the trigger guard, and without hardly squintin' at the target, lets go his first shot. Smack center to the bull for twenty points! Fleegleheimer gulps, but there's still four

shots to go before he loses.

Just then, the Paintin' Pistoleer catches sight of a flash of gay color over by the corral fence. There is Magnolia Malarkey, all decked out in a pink parasol and gauzy dress that drug the dirt. Her Auntie Prunella is hoverin' in the background like a tame jenny mule taggin' her around. Magnolia blows Smith a kiss.

Wellsir, the Paintin' Pistoleer, who is usually as cool as an icicle in competition, he starts to shiver like a cat lickin' a cactus. Instead of keepin' his eye on the target, he draws a bead whilst his eyes are makin' sheep-talk to Magnolia.

What follered was a disgrace to Apache, no less. Smith's second shot punched out a window light in the back end of Samanthie Coddlewort's chicken house, a block away. Later Samanthie finds her favor-ite Buff Orphington brood hen setting on its nest, minus its head.

Justin O's third bullet was closer by fifty yards to the target, but that didn't qualify it. It knocked the ventilator offn a privy behind the Feedbag Cafe and brought Dyspepsia Dan's Chinee cook, Aw Gwan, bustin' out of there with the newspaper he had been readin', scared stiff, thinkin' a tong war had busted out.

Fleegleheimer starts to snicker after the fourth shot hit the dirt. The boys along the fence rail began edgin' for the nearest alley, to get out of the way of this wild-flyin' lead the Paintin' Pistoleer was sprayin' the landscape with.

When his firin' pin finally clicked on a empty chamber, with the target only sportin' that first puncture, Smith shoves his hogleg in holster and zigzags like a sleepwalker over to where Magnolia Malarkey was fluttering her eyelashes at him.

"Justin, my dove," she was hearn to coo, "Ah never befo' in all mah borned days seen such shootin', Ah swear Ah ain't."

Well, neither had the boys who had laid bets on Smith to win at ten-to-one odds. Fleegleheimer carried better than $600 of Apache folks' hard-earned cash out of town that day, and it was obvious to all concerned that the Paintin' Pistoleer's celebrated gun rep was blowed higher than the brass ball on the courthouse flagpole.

And, things went from bad to worse! Durin' the next few days, Smith quit his studio to wait hand an' foot on this Magnolia filly. He reshingled a leaky patch on the Snodgrass roof, payin' for the same out of his own pocket, and he leased a gentle-broke hoss at the Cloverleaf Stables for Magnolia to joy-ride over the surroundin' desert with Smith during long summer evenings.

Magnolia wasn't popular with anyone else in 'Pache, though, because she was too stand-offish. The Ladies Knittin' & Peach Presarves Society invited her to their sociable, and she never showed up. Her aunt, Prunella Peebles, started a charge account at the O. K. Mercantile and she bamboozled pore old Sol Fishman into deliverin' their vittles up the hill every day, on threat of takin' their trade elsewhere. Elsewhere meaning Tucson, but all the same old Sol become Prunella's faithful errand boy, and all he got out of it was an occasional lemonade which Prunella would stir up for him. For an old soak like Sol, that was addin' insult to injury, but he seemed to thrive on it.

One day a telegram come offn the wires addressed to Smith. It was from this cowboy bootery up in Denver, and

what they had to say practically melted the wires, Lew Pirtle said:
RETURNING YOUR PARCEL VIA EXPRESS COLLECT. SURELY MUST BE SOME GHASTLY ERROR. WE ORDERED RODEO SCENE TITLED QUOTE RIDE 'EM COWBOY END QUOTE. YOU SHIPPED US CANVAS USED TO CATCH DRIPPINGS FROM YOUR EASEL. IF THIS YOUR IDEA OF JOKE YOUR HUMOR IN REMARKABLY POOR TASTE. PLEASE RUSH QUOTE RIDE 'EM COWBOY END QUOTE AS OUR CATALOG IS READY TO GO TO PRESS. OTHERWISE OUR CONTRACT WITH YOU CANCELED FORTHWITH.

Pirtle slid that telegram under the door of Smith's studio, but it's plumb doubtful if he seen it. Smith has talked Magnolia into settin' for a portrait, Sol Fishman reports, and has packed all his paintin' gear up to Snodgrass Mansion. For two weeks running Smith ain't turned out a tap of work, unlessen you count all the rug-beatin' and clothes-washin' and butter-churnin' and odd chores that kept him busy as a goat in a tin-can dump from daylight to dark.

Well, the boys had finally give up Justin Other Smith for lost, and was in at the Bloated Goat hoisting some Blue Bagpipe in his memory one evenin', when something happened.

The batwings fan open and in comes the stroppin'est big hombre ever seed in these parts. He wore a black hat, string tie, an' clawhammer coat, and was totin' a carpetbag all plastered up with hotel labels the same as that hosshide trunk Magnolia Malarkey had brung to Apache with her.

"Greetings and salutations, gentlemen!" this king-sized giant booms out to all and sundry. "I just alighted from the California Flyer. My name is Cedric Dangerfield Peebles. Often billed as Peebles the Great. No doubt you have heard of me. I am of the theatuh."

Well, the boys just look blank at each other. There ain't been a road show to 'Pache since the Baboon Cage Opery House was converted into a haybarn ten years or so back.

"What kin we do for you, Señor?" Curly Bill speaks up.

This actor twirls his long black mustaches just like he is fixin' to larrup pore old Uncle Tom with a blacksnake.

"I have come to join my wife, who is vacationing in this bucolic resort," he says, flashing his gold teeth. "Could I trouble you gents to direct me to the Snodgrass Mansion?"

Sol Fishman gags like he's found a dead bat in his beer. "You ain't marfed," he says, jealous as billy old hell, "to Miss Prunella Peebles, are you, Peebles?"

Cedric Dangerfield Peebles shudders with horror. "The Lord forbid!" he chuckles. "Prunella, bless her heart, is my father's sister. I am sure she is doomed to a life of single blessedness, considering her spinsterlike attributes."

It was quiet enough in the Bloated Goat then for a man to have heard a flea foragin' around in Heck Coddlewort's whiskers.

"My wife," Peebles goes on to explain, "travels professionally under the name of Magnolia Malarkey, the Belle of the Bayous. Surely her sojourn here has not gone unnoticed?"

This bombshell flabbergasts the boys, for shore. They were all thinkin' about the Paintin' Pistoleer, as game a little rooster as ever drawed breath, a-settin' up there in the moonlight on Snodgrass's veranda right this minute,

sparkin' with this here giant's lawfully wedded spouse.

T'warn't likely Smith would be packin' a gun tonight; and the way he had been goin' to pot of late, it wouldn't have done him much good ifn he had of been. Smith has been sucked into one of them triangle love affairs, that was plain to see, and he wouldn't stand no more chance in a tangle with this Peebles jasper than a hen egg under a steam roller.

"I—I'll be g-glad to t-take you up to the Snodgrass Mansion," Sol Fishman jitters out. "J-Jest one second, M-Mister Peebles."

Sol hustles Rimfire Cudd out of earshot and whispers for the sheriff to light a shuck up to Snodgrass Mansion and dab his loop on Smith. Fishman says he'll lead Cedric Dangerfield Peebles up the hill by a round-about way, to give Rimfire time to take a short cut and snatch Smith's bacon out of the fire.

Well, the scheme would have worked, too, ifn Rimfire Cudd hadn't of blundered into an open garbage pit alongside the mansion. The sheriff was bogged down in that hip-deep mess when Sol Fishman and the big actor arrived at the mansion.

Inside, the Paintin' Pistoleer was just fixin' to set down to supper with Auntie Prunella and Magnolia, when Cedric Dangerfield Peebles comes bowlin' into the kitchen and strikes a pose.

"I got your telegram, honey-chile," he booms, holding out his arms, "and I came without delay."

Well, the Paintin' Pistoleer can't believe his eyes when he sees Magnolia scamper acrost the room and put on a clinch with this chimney-high stranger, just like she was playin' a torrid love scene behind the footlights.

Sol Fishman is in the background, makin' frantic signals behind Peebles's back for the Paintin' Pistoleer to high-tail out the back door while he can. Instead, Smith is workin' up a mad.

When Magnolia turns around to leer at him, huggin' and squeezin' this giant from out of nowhere, Smith inquires in that soft Alabama drawl of hisn, "I presume this man is a brother you haven't gotten around to telling me about, Maggie darlin'?"

Peebles draws hisself up like a stage villain about to put the heroine under the buzz saw. "Darlin'? You call my wife darlin'?"

Auntie Prunella, knowin' the thunderbolt is about to strike, scuttles over to where Sol Fishman is standing and says, "How about us taking a little stroll in the moonlight, Sol dear? We must give Magnolia and her husband some privacy after their long separation. They're such a devoted couple."

Before Sol knows what's happenin', Prunella is draggin' him toward the back door. Passing Justin Other Smith, the old biddy whispers to him real gentle, "I'm sorry for you, you pore kid. I tried to discourage you from courting my niece, but you wouldn't listen to an old maid like me, remember?"

Smith is glued to his tracks. His breakin' heart is showin' in his eyes, like a hurt puppy. When Magnolia puckers up and kisses Cedric Dangerfield, the Paintin' Pistoleer looked liken he wanted the floor to swaller him up. He growed up in that moment, Smith did, like many a jilted suitor before him.

"You—you two are *married*?" Smith squeaks in a voice like a newborn kitten.

Peebles looks down at Magnolia

from up by the ceiling, and says in a voice like gravel on a tin roof, "Has this runt-sized Romeo been pestering you, sugarplum?"

Magnolia sniffs, "Not only that, Cedric beloved—but every day for the past three weeks he has been writing me passionate love letters, begging me to marry him!"

Peebles's face gits purple. Smith backs off, realizing he should be adding to the distance which separates him from that Goliath while he's still in one piece.

"Just one minute, small stuff!" sings out Magnolia, and her voice is like a hissin' snake fixing to strike. "You can't back out of your whirlwind courtship this easy. How would you like it if I let the citizens of Apache—say the old biddies in the Knitting & Peach Preserves Society—get a look at those love notes I've got locked in my trunk upstairs? Huh? Would you?"

Smith turns green around the gills. He ain't so numb he can't realize that just one of them letters, let alone the whole batch, would make him the laughin'stock of Arizona Territory.

"You were showing me your passbook from the Stockman's Bank, Justin," Magnolia reminds him. She glances up at Peebles. "He has salted away a very comfortable balance, Cedric, which he has been yearning to spend on my honeymoon trousseau. I've got that in writing, if he tries to deny it."

Cedric nods. "So you wrote me, chickadee." From the grin on Peebles's pan, it's plumb obvious that Magnolia has been in cahoots with her husband all along.

"Jim Groot opens the bank at nine in the morning, I believe," Magnolia goes on. "You withdraw your total deposits, Justin Other Smith, and have it up here by ten o'clock sharp, or by tomorrow noon your mushy letters will be in the hands of every gossiping old witch in this town!"

Smith never remembered how he got out of the Snodgrass Mansion and down the hill to town. Instinct told him to head for the Border and keep goin'. When he got to his studio, he found two friends waitin' for him—Rimfire Cudd, smellin' horrible from his dunking in the garbage pit, and Lawyer Plato X. Scrounge.

The Paintin' Pistoleer felt like kissing Plato, he was that glad to see a lawyer. As best he can, he tells his amigos what kind of a hell-fire jam he's in. They agree it's plumb desprit.

"I'd hate to tell you about them letters," he groans. "I didn't see anything suspicious about Maggie beggin' me to put my tender sentiments on paper. I poured out my soul in them letters. Signed 'em Smitty-Witty and Cookie Dumplin' and some other puppy-love names I blush to remember."

Scrounge starts pacin' the floor, his legal brain at work.

"Blackmail, that's what it is!" the lawyer says. "Or mebbe they've cooked up an alienation-of-affections suit, I dunno. However way we look at it, son, you've got yore tail kinked in a dozen knots an' caught in a tight crack. Mebbe you better head for Mexico until this blows over."

Justin O. groans like a mule has kicked him.

"No, by grab!" roars Sheriff Cudd. "Smith ain't no crook, that he has to run. As Sheriff of Stirrup County, it's up to me to git them love letters back, ifn I have to arrest them skunks."

Smith speaks up, snatchin' at straws, "Them letters are locked up in her

hosshide trunk, I know that. She was to give me an answer to my proposal of marriage by tomorrow. Instead she must of telegraphed her husband that the trap was ready for springin'."

Rimfire Cudd slaps his gun holster and heads for the door. "I'll git them letters," he promises Smith. "I'm goin' up and jail them blackmailers right now, on a fragrancy charge."

Plato X. Scrounge puts the kibosh on Cudd's zeal. "You may tote a star, Sheriff, but you can't do anything without a legal complaint. They'd deny any blackmail charges. After all, Smith here was courting another man's wife. Ignorance of her marital status is no excuse under the law. Searching the house without a warrant would leave you open to burglary charges. No, I'm afraid Smith will have to buy them letters back, like Magnolia has been schemin' all along."

Thinkin' back, the Paintin' Pistoleer realizes now that he had been picked out for the slaughter before Magnolia even got to Apache. She'd heard of Smith and knowed he prob'ly had a good fat bank account laid away for all the art he'd sold in the past.

Cudd brightens up. "We could set fire to the Snodgrass Mansion," he suggests. "Destroy the evi-dunce."

"The first thing Peebles and Magnolia would save would be that batch of letters," p'ints out Plato X. Scrounge. "Arson isn't the way out of this dilemma."

Well, the boys augered this way and that until well after midnight, when finally the Paintin' Pistoleer scum up a scheme.

"We'll go up to the mansion tonight," he says, "and sneak into the house. I know where Magnolia keeps that hosshide trunk of hers—in the library on the third floor. Once I get hold of those letters, I can thumb my nose at them blackmailers."

There wasn't any lights showin' in the Snodgrass Mansion when the Paintin' Pistoleer and the sheriff and Plato X. Scrounge clumb up the hill. They snuck around to the back, and find a pantry window unlatched. The mansion is a reglar beehive of rooms and halls and stairs, but Smith has scrubbed and dusted that wickiup from cellar to attic enough times to know his way around, even with it being as dark as a gorilla's armpit.

Finally they snuck up three flights of stairs and Smith leads his pards to a door under the cupola.

"This is the library," he whispers, "where Magnolia keeps her trunk. This is goin' to be easier than I deserve."

Plato X. Scrounge is nearest to the doorknob and he opens the door, and stands blinkin' into a blaze of light. Cedric Dangerfield Peebles is settin' there on Magnolia's open trunk, rifflin' through a batch of letters—Smith's love letters.

"Egad!" the actor bellers out, looking at Scrounge glued to the doorway. Smith and the sheriff are back in the shadders where Peebles ain't spotted them yet. "Who in Tophet are you?"

Scrounge gulps, thinkin' fast. "Uh—a carpenter," he says. "Miss Prunella ast me to come up and repair a squeaky shutter—"

"At two o'clock in the morning?" thunders Peebles. He hauls a pepperbox pistol out of his coat. "Begone, you interloping scum of creation, before I make you a candidate for the coroner!"

Scrounge turns around and slams into Smith and Rimfire, who race pell-mell after him down the hall. Perty soon they are all bawled up to beat hell

in the various twistings and turnings of this rat maze, completely mixed up. Finally, breathin' like stove-up cow-critters, they bump into a door at the dead end of a corridor.

"We're fools for luck," Smith wheezes. "This door opens to safety—an outdoor fire escape. Come on before that Peebles jasper shows up and salivates the three of us. Hurry!"

Smith opens the door—to find they're back at the library, with Peebles still settin' on the trunk, busy stuffin' Smith's love letters into a cardboard box.

The three burglars tumble over each other getting out of that door. This time Peebles is right after them, his pepperbox pistol blazing. Justin O. got lost somewhere in the shuffle, mebbe with a slug in him, for all Plato and the sheriff knowed; but them two kept goin' like the devil was after them, stumblin' an' shin-bangin' hell-for-leather and whoopin' like Injuns.

In the dark, with bullets whistlin' all around, they miss a turn and hit a door goin' full gallop. It caves in and Cudd and the lawyer find themselves out on a balcony overlookin' the yard.

"This way, Plato!" yells Rimfire. "Straddle this rail. We can shinny down this lightnin' rod."

Rimfire gets hold of said lightnin' rod and in two shakes he's slid down to terror firmer. He hears Plato's boots slidin' down the brick wall and he ducks, but there is a gosh-awful slam-bang and a splash off to one side and Cudd sees Scrounge jackknifed upside down in a rain barrel, drownin' before his very eyes.

By this time Peebles is leanin' over the balcony rail three stories up, shootin' up the landscape. Rimfire hauls Scrounge out of the barrel and they rattle their hocks down the hill out of range.

"Why didn't you warn me there was a bar'l at the bottom of that dod-blasted lightnin' rod?" Scrounge gargles out, coughin' water.

"You damned iggorant yahoo, you slid down the gutter pipe!" retorts the sheriff. "Ifn I hadn't risked my hide, you'd be a water-logged corpus wedged in that bar'l right this minute."

Scrounge applegizes. "By rights," he says, "we orter sashay back thar an' see what's happened to poor Justin O."

"Yeah," Rimfire agrees. "We can't leave him in that fix with a loony tick gunnin' for him."

By this time lights are blazin' all over the mansion, and they figger Smith's fish is fried for shore. After makin' several false starts and losin' their nerve, Cudd and Scrounge decide to go back to the sheriff's office and fortify themselves with a drink.

First thing they see when they reach the jailhouse is Magnolia and her husband, waitin' for 'em. Scrounge heads for the mesquites, but Cudd reins up when he hears what Peebles has to say:

"I'm hear to swear out a warrant for the arrest of John Doe and Richard Roe. A carpenter and his helper who feloniously broke into the mansion and stole some valuables from my wife's trunk!"

Plato starts grinnin', a bright light dawning in his knothead.

"What kind of valuables?" Rimfire asks. "It wouldn't be a package of love letters, now, would it?"

Just then there is a jangle of spurs coming around the corner of the calaboose. It's the Paintin' Pistoleer, jaunty as a jaybird. He's carryin' a rusty tin can he's picked up on the munisipple dump, and it's fumin' smoke and flame.

The Paintin' Pistoleer bows to Magnolia, and hands her the tin can. It's so hot she drops it. Out spills a mess of ashes.

"I'm returning the letters I snatched out of your trunk while your husband was busy chasing my fellow burglars," Smith says smug-like. "My masterpieces of prose were so passionate that spontaneous combustion consumed them."

Magnolia and Peebles stare at each other like the world has caved in on their shoulders. They realize all their connivin' and plottin' to steal Smith's bankroll has gone up in smoke tonight.

"I think," speaks up the sheriff, "that you bad actors—ifn you'll pardon the pun—won't find Apache a very healthy spot for holiday purposes. There is a stage leavin' for Lordsburg at daylight. You'll find the climate cooler over in New Mexico."

Magnolia Malarkey and that husband who was built like a brick smokehouse, they pulled out of 'Pache on that Lordsburg stage, all right. And Justin Other Smith wasn't around to see the light of his life go out. He was fast asleep up in his studio.

It was after sundown when Justin O. finally woke up. He seen all his accumulated mail, including the Denver telegram, and he remembers his paintin' gear is still up at the mansion.

He sashays downstairs and the first thing he seen, steppin' outdoors, was the big crêpe funeral wreath hangin' on the doorknob of the O. K. Mercantile.

"What happened?" Smith asks Plato X. Scrounge, who was on his way to the Bloated Goat just then. "Did Sol's heart give out on him?"

"It did. At three-fifteen this afternoon," Plato says doleful. "Come into Curly Bill's. We'll hoist a few to Sol (sob), wherever he is."

The Paintin' Pistoleer is too shocked to see straight. "I ain't got time," he blubbers. "I got a month's work to ketch up on— Poor Sol. I can't imagine him bein' dead an' gone."

Plato X. Scrounge daubs at his eye with a handkerchief. "He's worse off than dead," he says. "As justice of the peaces, I couldn't refuse to tie the knot. Sol got hitched in double harness to Prunella Peebles at three-fifteen in my office. They've eloped to Californy for a honeymoon. God rest his soul."

Smith grabs Plato and practically drug him into the Bloated Goat. Curly Bill reaches for the buttermilk jug, as usual.

"Make mine whisky—neat," says the Paintin' Pistoleer, and all the boys relax, knowing he's his old self agin. "And hold the chaser. Belly up, boys, and help me celebrate my good luck. I might be in the same boat with poor old Sol Fishman tonight."

Answers to "Around a Mining Camp" Quiz

(See page 139)

1. Ore-hauling car. 2. Large body of rich ore. 3. Thinning of a vein. 4. Barren rock. 5. Ventilating shaft between levels. 6. Non-ore-bearing rock around a vein. 7. Well sunk beneath a shaft. 8. Iron bars at bottom of ore chute. 9. Pulverized ore escaping from wet-process mill. 10. Opening running along the course of a vein.

An Original ZGWM Fact Feature

Shearing the Shepherd

By JAMES E. HUNGERFORD

IN CALIFORNIA gold-rush days, the famous old desert mining-camp, Calico, was running "wide open," without a single preacher in the boom town to officiate at weddings and funerals, or save hell-bent citizens from the devil's pitfalls and snares. Gambling-parlors, dance halls, saloons were grabbing off generous shares of "the root of all evil."

Hearing of this deplorable condition, the Reverend Samuel Smyth deserted his Los Angeles pulpit temporarily, and set forth on a "reform" missionary-pilgrimage to the California Desert's reputedly "wickedest town."

There were thirteen saloons in Calico, the proprietor and bartender of the leading one being the notorious gun-packing "Ma" Preston, who dressed like a man, smoked a pipe, fought fist fights, gambled, and swore like a mule-skinner!

Arriving in Calico, Reverend Smyth was surprised to find things quiet and orderly as compared with the lawlessness of other gold-rush towns. The citizens seemed fairly well-behaved, and most of them were enjoying a considerable measure of prosperity.

"Ma" Preston was "boss" of Calico, and had the camp well in hand. "Ma" served the community as lawyer, doctor, sheriff, and frequently preached funeral services. "We don't need a sky pilot," she informed Reverend Smyth.

After a few days in Calico, the Los

Angeles parson noted that many of the town's citizens were well supplied with "easy money" gleaned from mining-claims. It seemed such an easy matter to get rich quick that Reverend Smyth decided to indulge in a modest financial venture on his own behalf. He was "hooked" in a flash! A bunco-artist with solemn, pious face and gentlemanly manners unloaded a worthless claim on the minister of the gospel for five hundred dollars.

A few days later, Jim Coleman, the crook, showed up in Calico's neighboring town of Trona, where wagon-loads of "white rocks" were being teamed in from the desert, milled to a powder, and shipped to Eastern markets. Coleman instantly identified the "white rocks" as the identical sort of "stones" that were strewn over the supposedly worthless claim he had unloaded on the Reverend Samuel Smyth.

Under cover of night, Coleman sneaked back to Calico, got samples of the "white rocks" from his erstwhile claim, and upon returning to Trona was informed by a mining-chemist that the *borax* rocks were a better grade of stuff than was being wagon-teamed into Trona from the California Desert.

Meanwhile, Reverend Samuel Smyth, convinced by "Ma" Preston that he had been outrageously gypped by Coleman on the mining-claim deal, returned to his church pulpit in Los Angeles, a sadder but wiser man. He was delivering a rousing sermon condemning unscrupulous "tricksters" who preyed upon trusting victims, when whom should he see seated in his church audience but Jim Coleman, the slicker who had sold him the worthless claim in Calico!

After the service, Coleman came meekly forward, and asserted solemnly to Reverend Smyth that he had repented of his evil doings and been "converted." His sins, he sadly confessed, had preyed on his conscience, and he wanted to make such amends as he could to square himself for cheating the shepherd of the Los Angeles church flock.

"My object in being here," continued Coleman sorrowfully, "is to return to you the five hundred dollars you paid me for the utterly worthless mining-claim I sold you in Calico. And to prove to you how unhappy I am for cheating a minister of the gospel, I am giving you a hundred dollars extra for so cruelly wronging you, and taking my worthless mining-claim back. Is it a deal, Parson?"

Reverend Samuel Smyth was deeply moved—a lost sheep had returned to the fold, he thought.

"I forgive you and accept your generous offer of restitution," he informed Coleman huskily. "Bless you for the six hundred dollars, and you are more than welcome to your old mining-claim back. Go forth, my brother, and sin no more."

Coleman made speed back to Trona, and sold the "worthless" mining-claim to "Borax Ed" Smith for a highly satisfactory chunk of cash—several thousand dollars.

The devil soon caught up with the rascal, however. Trona and Calico gambling sharks stripped him of his ill-gotten gains, leaving him flat broke. Eventually he was run out of Calico by irate citizens.

"The low-down polecat got off too easy, just losing his roll!" said "Ma" Preston grimly. "We ought to have hung the preacher-cheatin' skunk and fed him to the buzzards!"

A BLUE-EYED, *yellow-haired girl comes to Buck Johnson's Lazy Y ranch—to ride the range with him, to hunt and pack-trip into the hills with him, he hopes. This story of a man's dreams and disillusionment is one of the finest ever written by this outstanding Western author.*

A Western Classic

The Rawhide

By Stewart Edward White

CHAPTER ONE

The Passing of the Colt's Forty-Five

THE man of whom I am now to tell you came to Arizona in the early days of Chief Cochise. He settled in the Soda Springs Valley, and there persisted in spite of the devastating forays of that Apache. After a time he owned all the wells and springs in the valley, and so, naturally, controlled the grazing on that extensive free range. Once a day the cattle, in twos and threes, in bands, in strings, could be seen winding leisurely down the deep-trodden and converging trails to the water troughs at the home ranch, there leisurely to drink, and then leisurely to drift away into the saffron and violet and amethyst distances of the desert. At ten other outlying ranches this daily scene was repeated. All these cattle be-

From ARIZONA NIGHTS, *copyright, 1907, 1935, by Stewart Edward White. By arrangement with Brandt & Brandt.*

longed to the man, great by reason of his priority in the country, the balance of his even character, and the grim determination of his spirit.

When he had first entered Soda Springs Valley his companions had called him Buck Johnson. Since then his form had squared, his eyes had steadied to the serenity of a great authority, his mouth, shadowed by the mustache and the beard, had closed straight in the line of power and taciturnity. There was about him more than a trace of the Spanish. So now he was known as Señor Johnson, although in reality he was straight American enough.

Señor Johnson lived at the home ranch with a Chinese cook, and Parker, his foreman. The home ranch was of adobe, built with loopholes like a fort. In the obsolescence of this necessity, other buildings had sprung up unfortified. An adobe bunkhouse for the cowpunchers, an adobe blacksmith shop, a long, low stable, a shed, a windmill and pondlike reservoir, a whole system of corrals of different sizes, a walled-in vegetable garden—these gathered to themselves cottonwoods from the moisture of their being, and so added each a little to the green spot in the desert. In the smallest corral, between the stable and the shed, stood a buckboard and a heavy wagon, the only wheeled vehicles about the place. Under the shed were rows of saddles, riatas, spurs mounted with silver, bits ornamented with the same metal, curved short irons for the range branding, long, heavy "stamps" for the corral branding. Behind the stable lay the "pasture," a thousand acres of desert fenced in with wire. There the hardy cowponies sought out the sparse, but nutritious, bunch grass, sixty of them, beautiful as antelope, for they were the pick of Señor Johnson's herds.

And all about lay the desert, shimmering, changing, many-tinted, wonderful, hemmed in by the mountains that seemed tenuous and thin, like beautiful mists, and by the sky that seemed hard and polished like a turquoise.

Each morning at six o'clock the ten cowpunchers of the home ranch drove the horses to the corral, neatly roped the dozen to be "kept up" for that day, and rewarded the rest with a feed of grain. Then they rode away at a little fox trot, two by two. All day long they traveled thus, conducting the business of the range, and at night, having completed the circle, they jingled again into the corral. At the ten other ranches this program had been duplicated. The half-hundred men of Señor Johnson's outfit had covered the area of a European principality. All of it, every acre, every spear of grass, every cactus prickle, every creature on it, practically belonged to Señor Johnson, because Señor Johnson owned the water, and without water one cannot exist on the desert.

This result had not been gained without struggle. The fact could be read in the settled lines of Señor Johnson's face, and the great calm of his gray eye. Indian days drove him often to the shelter of the loopholed adobe ranch house, there to await the soldiers from the Fort, in plain sight thirty miles away on the slope that led to the foot of the Chiricahuas. He lost cattle and some men, but the profits were great, and in time Cochise, Geronimo, and the lesser lights had flickered out in the winds of destiny. The sheep terror merely threatened, for it was soon discovered that with the feed of Soda

Springs Valley grew a burr that annoyed the flocks beyond reason, so the bleating scourge swept by forty miles away.

Cattle rustling so near the Mexican line was an easy matter. For a time Señor Johnson commanded an armed band. He was lord of the high, the low, and the middle justice. He violated international ethics, and for the laws of nations he substituted his own. One by one he annihilated the thieves of cattle, sometimes in open fight, but oftener by surprise and deliberate massacre. The country was delivered. And then, with indefatigable energy, Señor Johnson became a skilled detective. Alone, or with Parker, his foreman, he rode the country through, gathering evidence. When the evidence was unassailable he brought offenders to book. The rebranding through a wet blanket he knew and could prove; the earmarking of an unbranded calf until it could be weaned he understood; the paring of hoofs to prevent traveling he could tell as far as he could see; the crafty alteration of similar brands—as when a Mexican changed Johnson's Lazy Y to a Dumbbell Bar—he saw through at a glance. In short, the hundred and one petty tricks of the sneak thief he ferreted out, in danger of his life. Then he sent to Phoenix for a Ranger—and that was the last of the Dumbbell Bar brand, or the Three Link Bar brand, or the Hour Glass brand, or half a dozen others. The Soda Springs Valley acquired a reputation for good order.

Señor Johnson at this stage of his career found himself dropping into a routine. In March began the spring branding, then the corraling and breaking of the wild horses, the summer range riding, the great fall roundup, the shipping of cattle, and the riding of the winter range. This happened over and over again.

You and I would not have suffered from ennui. The roping and throwing and branding, the wild swing and dash of handling stock, the mad races to head the mustangs, the fierce combats to subdue these raging wild beasts to the saddle, the spectacle of the roundup with its brutish multitudes and its graceful riders, the dust and monotony and excitement and glory of the Trail, and especially the hundreds of incidental and gratuitous adventures of bears and antelope, of thirst and heat, of the joy of taking care of one's self—all these would have filled our days with the glittering, charging throng of the unusual.

But to Señor Johnson it had become an old story. After the days of construction the days of accomplishment seemed to him lean. His men did the work and reaped the excitement. Señor Johnson never thought now of riding the wild horses, of swinging the rope coiled at his saddle horn, or of rounding ahead of the flying herds. His inspections were business inspections. The country was tame. The leather chaps with the silver conchas hung behind the door. The Colt's forty-five depended at the head of the bed. Señor Johnson rode in mufti. Of his cowboy days persisted still the high-heeled boots and spurs, the broad Stetson hat, and the fringed buckskin gauntlets.

The Colt's forty-five had been the last to go. Finally one evening Señor Johnson received an express package. He opened it before the undemonstrative Parker. It proved to contain a pocket "gun"—a nickel-plated, thirty-eight-caliber Smith & Wesson "five-shooter." Señor Johnson examined it a little doubtfully. In comparison with the six-

shooter it looked like a toy.

"How do you like her?" he inquired, handing the weapon to Parker.

Parker turned it over and over, as a child a rattle. Then he returned it to its owner. "Señor," said he, "if ever you shoot me with that little old gun, and I find it out the same day, I'll just raise hell with you!"

"I don't reckon she'd *injure* a man much," agreed the Señor, "but perhaps she'd call his attention."

However, the "little old gun" took its place, not in Señor Johnson's hip pocket, but inside the front waistband of his trousers, and the old shiny Colt's forty-five, with its "Texas-style" holster, became a bedroom ornament.

Thus, from a frontiersman dropped Señor Johnson to the status of a property owner. In a general way he had to attend to his interests before the cattlemen's association; he had to arrange for the buying and shipping, and the rest was leisure. He could now have gone away somewhere as far as time went. So can a fish live in trees—as far as time goes. And in the daily riding, riding, riding over the range he found the opportunity for abstract thought which the frontier life had crowded aside.

Chapter Two

The Shapes of Illusion

EVERY day, as always, Señor Johnson rode abroad over the land. His surroundings had before been accepted casually as a more or less pertinent setting of action and condition. Now he sensed some of the fascination of the Arizona desert.

He noticed many things before unnoticed. As he jingled loosely along on his cow horse, he observed how the animal waded fetlock-deep in the gorgeous orange California poppies, and then he looked up and about, and saw that the rich color carpeted the landscape as far as his eye could reach, so that it seemed as though he could ride on and on through them to the distant Chiricahuas. Only, close under the hills, lay, unobtrusive, a narrow streak of gray. And in a few hours he had reached the streak of gray, and ridden out into it to find himself the center of a limitless alkali plain, so that again it seemed the valley could contain nothing else of importance.

Looking back, Señor Johnson could discern a tenuous ribbon of orange—the poppies. And perhaps ahead a little shadow blotted the face of the alkali, which, being reached and entered, spread like fire until it, too, filled the whole plain, until it, too, arrogated to itself the right of typifying Soda Springs Valley as a shimmering prairie of mesquite. Flowered upland, dead lowland, brush, cactus, volcanic rock, sand, each of these for the time being occupied the whole space, broad as the sea. In the circlet of the mountains was room for many infinities.

Among the foothills Señor Johnson, for the first time, appreciated color. Hundreds of acres of flowers filled the velvet creases of the little hills and washed over the smooth, rounded slopes so accurately in the placing and manner of tinted shadows that the mind had difficulty in believing the color not to have been shaded in actually by free sweeps of some gigantic brush. A dozen shades of pinks and purples, a dozen of blues, and then the flame-reds, the yellows, and the vivid greens.

Beyond were the mountains in their glory of volcanic rocks, rich as the tapestry of a Florentine palace. And, modifying all the others, the tinted atmosphere of the Southwest, refracting the sun through the infinitesimal earth motes thrown up constantly by the wind devils of the desert, drew before the scene a delicate and gauzy veil of lilac, of rose, of saffron, of amethyst, or of mauve, according to the time of day.

Señor Johnson discovered that looking at the landscape upside down accentuated the color effects. It amused him vastly suddenly to bend over his saddle horn, the top of his head nearly touching his horse's mane. The distant mountains at once started out into redder prominence; their shadows of purple deepened to the royal color; the rose veil thickened.

"She's the prettiest country God ever made!" exclaimed Señor Johnson with entire conviction.

And no matter where he went, nor into how familiar country he rode, the shapes of illusion offered always variety. One day the Chiricahuas were a tableland; next day a series of castellated peaks; now an anvil; now a saw tooth; and rarely they threw a magnificent suspension bridge across the heavens to their neighbors, the ranges on the west. Lakes rippling in the wind and breaking on the shore, cattle big as elephants or small as rabbits; distances that did not exist and forests that never were, beds of lava along the hills swearing to a cloud shadow, while the sky was polished like a precious stone—these, and many other beautiful and marvelous but empty shows the great desert displayed lavishly, with the glitter and inconsequence of a dream. Señor Johnson sat on his horse in the hot sun, his chin in his hand, his elbow on the pommel, watching it all with grave, unshifting eyes.

Occasionally, belated, he saw the stars, the wonderful desert stars, blazing clear and unflickering, like the flames of candles. Or the moon worked her necromancies, hemming him in by mountains ten thousand feet high through which there was no pass. And then as he rode, the mountains shifted like the scenes in a theater, and he crossed the little sand dunes out from the dream country to the adobe corrals of the home ranch.

All these things, and many others, Señor Johnson now saw for the first time, although he had lived among them for twenty years. It struck him with the freshness of a surprise. Also it reacted chemically on his mental processes to generate a new power within him. The new power, being as yet unapplied, made him uneasy and restless and a little irritable. He tried to show some of his wonders to Parker.

"Jed," said he one day, "this is a great country."

"You know it," replied the foreman.

"Those tourists in their nickel-plated Pullmans call this a desert. Desert, hell! Look at them flowers!"

The foreman cast an eye on a glorious silken mantle of purple, a hundred yards broad. "Sure," he agreed; "shows what we could do if we only had a little water."

And again: "Jed," began the Señor, "did you ever notice them mountains?"

"Sure," agreed Jed.

"Ain't that a pretty color?"

"You bet," agreed the foreman; "now you're talking! I always said they was mineralized enough to make a good prospect."

This was unsatisfactory. Señor John-

son grew more restless. His critical eye began to take account of small details. At the ranch house one evening he, on a sudden, bellowed loudly for Sang, the Chinese servant.

"Look at these!" he roared when Sang appeared.

Sang's eyes opened in bewilderment.

"There, and there!" shouted the cattleman. "Look at them old newspapers and them gun rags! The place is like a cow yard. Why in the name of heaven don't you clean up here!"

"Allee light," babbled Sang; "I clean him."

The papers and gun rags had lain there unnoticed for nearly a year. Señor Johnson kicked them savagely.

"It's time we took a brace here," he growled. "We're livin' like a lot of Oilers."

Chapter Three

The Paper a Year Old

SANG hurried out for a broom. Señor Johnson sat where he was, his heavy, square brows knit. Suddenly he stooped, seized one of the newspapers, drew near the lamp, and began to read.

It was a Kansas City paper and, by a strange coincidence, was dated exactly a year before. The sheet Señor Johnson happened to pick up was one usually passed over by the average newspaper reader. It contained only columns of little two-and three-line advertisements classified as *Help Wanted*, *Situations Wanted*, *Lost and Found*, and *Personal*. The latter items Señor Johnson commenced to read while awaiting Sang and the broom.

The notices were five in number. The first three were of the mysterious newspaper-correspondence type, in which Birdie beseeches Jack to meet her at the fountain; the fourth advertised a clairvoyant. Over the fifth Señor Johnson paused long. It read: *Wanted—By an intelligent and refined lady of pleasing appearance, correspondence with a gentleman of means. Object matrimony.*

Just then Sang returned with the broom and began noisily to sweep up the debris. The rustling of papers aroused Señor Johnson from his reverie. At once he exploded.

"Get out of here, you debased Mongolian!" he shouted. "Can't you see I'm reading?"

Sang fled, sorely puzzled, for the Señor was calm and unexcited and aloof in his everyday habit.

Soon Jed Parker, tall, wiry, hawk-nosed, deliberate, came into the room and flung his broad hat and spurs into the corner. Then he proceeded to light his pipe and threw the burned match on the floor.

"Been over to look at the Grant Pass range," he announced cheerfully. "She's no good. Drier than cork legs. Th' country wouldn't support three horned toads."

"Jed," quoth the Señor solemnly, "I wisht you'd hang up your hat like I have. It don't look good there on the floor."

"Why, sure," agreed Jed, with an astonished stare.

Sang brought in supper and slung it on the red and white squares of oilcloth. Then he moved the lamp and retired.

Señor Johnson gazed with distaste into his cup. "This coffee would float a wedge," he commented sourly.

"She's no puling infant," agreed the cheerful Jed.

"And this!" went on the Señor, picking up what purported to be plum duff: "Bog down a few currants in dough and call her pudding!"

He ate in silence, then pushed back his chair and went to the window, gazing through its grimy panes at the mountains, ethereal in their evening saffron.

"Blamed Chink," he growled, "why don't he wash these windows?"

Jed laid down his busy knife and idle fork to gaze on his chief with amazement. Buck Johnson, the austere, the aloof, the grimly taciturn, the dangerous, to be thus complaining like a querulous woman!

"Señor," said he, "you're off your feed."

Señor Johnson strode savagely to the table and sat down with a bang. "I'm sick of it," he growled; "this thing will kill me off. I might as well go be a buck nun and be done with it."

With one round-arm sweep he cleared aside the dishes. "Give me that pen and paper behind you," he requested.

For an hour he wrote and destroyed. The floor became littered with torn papers. Then he enveloped a meager result. Parker had watched him in silence. The Señor looked up to catch his speculative eye. His own eye twinkled a little, but the twinkle was determined and sinister, with only an alloy of humor.

"Señor," ventured Parker slowly, "this event sure knocks me hell-west and crooked. If the loco you have culled hasn't paralyzed your speaking parts, would you mind telling me what in the name of heaven, hell, and high water is up?"

"I am going to get married," announced the Señor calmly.

"What!" shouted Parker. "Who to?"

"To a lady," replied the Señor, "an intelligent and refined lady—of pleasing appearance."

Chapter Four

Dreams

ALTHOUGH the paper was a year old, Señor Johnson in due time received an answer from Kansas. A correspondence ensued. Señor Johnson enshrined above the big fireplace the photograph of a woman. Before this he used to stand for hours at a time slowly constructing in his mind what he had hitherto lacked—an ideal of woman and of home. This ideal he used sometimes to express to himself and to the ironical Jed.

"It must sure be nice to have a little woman waitin' for you when you come in off'n the desert." Or: "Now, a woman would have them windows just blooming with flowers and white curtains and such truck." Or: "I bet that Sang would get a wiggle on him with his little old cleaning-duds if he had a woman ahead of his jerk line."

Slowly he reconstructed his life, the life of the ranch, in terms of this hypothesized feminine influence. Then matters came to an understanding. Señor Johnson had sent his own portrait. Estrella Sands wrote back that she adored big black beards, but she was afraid of him, he had such a fascinating bad eye, no woman could resist him. Señor Johnson at once took things for granted, sent on to Kansas a preposterous sum of "expense" money and a railroad ticket, and raided Goodrich's

store at Willets, a hundred miles away, for all manner of gaudy carpets, silverware, fancy lamps, works of art, pianos, linen, and gimcracks for the adornment of the ranch house. Furthermore, he offered wages more than equal to a hundred miles of desert to a young Irish girl, named Susie O'Toole, to come out as housekeeper, decorator, boss of Sang and another Chinaman, and companion to Mrs. Johnson when she should arrive.

Furthermore, he laid off from the range work Brent Palmer, the most skillful man with horses, and set him to "gentling" a beautiful little sorrel. A side saddle had arrived from El Paso. It was "center-fire," which is to say it had but the single horsehair cinch, broad, tasseled, very genteel in its suggestion of pleasure use only. Brent could be seen at all times of day, cantering here and there on the sorrel, a blanket tied around his waist to simulate the long riding-skirt. He carried also a sulky and evil gleam in his eye, warning against undue levity.

Jed Parker watches these various proceedings sardonically. Once, the baby light of innocence blue in his eye, he inquired if he would be required to dress for dinner. "If so," he went on, "I'll have my man brush up my low-necked clothes."

But Señor Johnson refused to be baited. "Go on, Jed," said he; "you know you ain't got clothes enough to dust a fiddle."

The Señor was happy these days. He showed it by an unwonted joviality of spirit, by a slight but evident unbending of his Spanish dignity. No longer did the splendor of the desert fill him with a vague yearning and uneasiness. He looked upon it confidently, noting its various phases with care, rejoicing in each new development of color and light, of form and illusion, storing them away in his memory so that their recurrence should find him prepared to recognize and explain them. For soon he would have someone by his side with whom to appreciate them. In that sharing he could see the reason for them, the reason for their strange bitter-sweet effects on the human soul.

One evening he leaned on the corral fence, looking toward the Dragoons. The sun had set behind them. Gigantic they loomed against the western light. From their summits, like an aureole, radiated the splendor of the dust-moted air, this evening a deep amber. A faint reflection of it fell across the desert, glorifying the reaches of its nothingness.

"I'll take her out on an evening like this," quoth Señor Johnson to himself, "and I'll make her keep her eye on the ground till we get right up by Running Bear Knob, and then I'll let her look up all at once. And she'll surely enjoy this life. I bet she never saw a steer roped in her life. She can ride with me every day out over the range and I'll show her the busting and the branding and that band of antelope over by the Tall Windmill. I'll teach her to shoot, too. And we can make little pack trips off in the hills when she gets too hot—up there by Deerskin Meadows 'mongst the high peaks."

He mused, turning over in his mind a new picture of his own life, aims, and pursuits as modified by the sympathetic and understanding companionship of a woman. He pictured himself as he must seem to her in his different pursuits. The picturesqueness pleased him. The simple, direct vanity of the man—the wholesome vanity of a straightforward nature—awakened to

preen its feathers before the idea of the mate.

The shadows fell. Over the Chiricahuas flared the evening star. The plain, self-luminous with the weird lucence of the arid lands, showed ghostly. Jed Parker, coming out from the lamp-lit adobe, leaned his elbows on the rail in silent company with his chief. He, too, looked abroad. His mind's eye saw what his body's eye had always told him were the insistent notes—the alkali, the cactus, the sage, the mesquite, the lava, the choking dust, the blinding heat, the burning thirst. He sighed in the dim half recollection of past days.

"I wonder if she'll like the country?" he hazarded.

But Señor Johnson turned on him his steady eyes, filled with the great glory of the desert. "Like the country!" he marveled slowly. "Of course! Why shouldn't she?"

Chapter Five

The Arrival

THE Overland drew into Willets, coated from engine to observation with white dust. A porter, in strange contrast of neatness, flung open the vestibule, dropped his little carpeted step, and turned to assist someone. A few idle passengers gazed out on the uninteresting, flat frontier town.

Señor Johnson caught his breath in amazement. "God! Ain't she just like her picture!" he exclaimed. He seemed to find this astonishing.

For a moment he did not step forward to claim her, so she stood looking about her uncertainly, her leather suitcase at her feet.

She was indeed like the photograph. The same full-curved, compact little figure, the same round face, the same cupid's-bow mouth, the same appealing, large eyes, the same haze of doll's hair. In a moment she caught sight of Señor Johnson and took two steps toward him, then stopped. The Señor at once came forward.

"You're Mr. Johnson, ain't you?" she inquired, thrusting her little pointed chin forward, and so elevating her baby-blue eyes to his.

"Yes, ma'am," he acknowledged formally. Then, after a moment's pause: "I hope you're well."

"Yes, thank you."

The station loungers, augmented by all the ranchmen and cowboys in town, were examining her closely. She looked at them in a swift side glance that seemed to gather all their eyes to hers. Then, satisfied that she possessed the universal admiration, she returned the full force of her attention to the man before her.

"Now you give me your trunk checks," he was saying, "and then we'll go right over and get married."

"Oh!" she gasped.

"That's right, ain't it?" he demanded.

"Yes, I suppose so," she agreed.

A little subdued, she followed him to the clergyman's house, where, in the presence of Goodrich, the storekeeper, and the preacher's wife, the two were united. Then they mounted the buckboard and drove from town.

Señor Johnson said nothing, because he knew of nothing to say. He drove skillfully and fast through the gathering dusk. It was a hundred miles to the home ranch, and that hundred miles, by means of five relays of horses already arranged for, they would cover by morning. Thus they would avoid the

dust and heat and high winds of the day.

The sweet night fell. The little desert winds laid soft fingers on their cheeks. Overhead burned the stars, clear, unflickering, like candles. Dimly could be seen the horses, their flanks swinging steadily in the square trot. Ghostly bushes passed them, ghostly rock elevations. Far, in indeterminate distance, lay the outlines of the mountains. Always, they seemed to recede. The plain, all but invisible, the wagon trail quite so, the depths of space—these flung heavy on the soul their weight of mysticism.

The woman, until now bolt-upright in the buckboard seat, shrank nearer to the man. He felt against his sleeve the delicate contact of her garment and thrilled to the touch. A coyote barked sharply from a neighboring eminence, then trailed off into the long-drawn, shrill howl of his species.

"What was that?" she asked quickly.

"A coyote—one of them little wolves," he explained.

The horses' hoofs rang clear on a hardened bit of the alkali crust, then dully as they encountered again the dust of the plain. Vast, vague, mysterious in the silence of night, filled with strange influences breathing through space like damp winds, the desert took them to the heart of her great spaces.

"Buck," she whispered, a little tremblingly. It was the first time she had spoken his name.

"What is it?" he asked, a new note in his voice.

But for a time she did not reply. Only the contact against his sleeve increased by ever so little. "Buck," she repeated, then all in a rush and with a sob, "Oh, I'm afraid."

Tenderly the man drew her to him.

"There, little girl," he reassured her, his big voice rich and musical. "There's nothing to get scairt of. I'll take care of you. What frightens you, honey?"

She nestled close in his arm with a sigh of half relief. "I don't know," she laughed, but still with a tremble in her tones. "It's all so big and lonesome and strange—and I'm so little."

"There, little girl," he repeated.

They drove on and on. At the end of two hours they stopped. Men with lanterns dazzled their eyes. The horses were changed, and so out again into the night where the desert seemed to breathe in deep, mysterious exhalations like a sleeping beast.

Señor Johnson drove his horses masterfully with his one free hand. The road did not exist, except to his trained eyes. They seemed to be swimming out, out, into a vapor of night with the wind of their going steady against their faces.

"Buck," she murmured, "I'm so tired."

He tightened his arm around her and she went to sleep, half-waking at the ranches where the relays waited, dozing again as soon as the lanterns dropped behind. And Señor Johnson, alone with his horses and the solemn stars, drove on, ever on, into the desert.

By gray of the early summer dawn they arrived.

The girl wakened, descended, smiling uncertainly at Susie O'Toole, blinking somnolently at her surroundings. Susie put her to bed in the little southwest room where hung the shiny Colt's forty-five in its worn leather "Texas-style" holster. She murmured incoherent thanks and sank again to sleep, overcome by the fatigue of unaccustomed traveling, by the potency of the desert air, by the excitement of antici-

pation to which her nerves had long been strung.

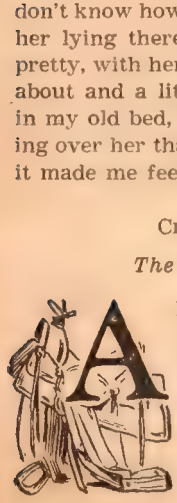
Señor Johnson did not sleep. He was tough, and used to it. He lit a cigar and rambled about, now reading the newspapers he had brought with him, now prowling softly about the building, now visiting the corrals and outbuildings, once even the thousand-acre pasture where his saddle horse knew him and came to him to have its forehead rubbed.

The dawn broke in good earnest, throwing aside its gauzy draperies of mauve. Sang, the Chinese cook, built his fire. Señor Johnson forbade him to clang the rising-bell, and himself roused the cowpunchers. The girl slept on. Señor Johnson tiptoed a dozen times to the bedroom door. Once he ventured to push it open. He looked long within, then shut it softly and tiptoed out into the open, his eyes shining.

"Jed," he said to his foreman, "you don't know how it made me feel. To see her lying there so pink and soft and pretty, with her yaller hair all tumbled about and a little smile on her—there in my old bed, with my old gun hanging over her that way—By heaven, Jed, it made me feel almost holy!"

Chapter Six

The Wagon Tire



ABOUT noon she emerged from the room, fully refreshed and wide awake. She and Susie O'Toole had unpacked at least one of the trunks, and now she stood arrayed in shirtwaist and blue skirt. At once she stepped into the open air and looked about her with considerable curiosity.

"So this is a real cattle ranch," was her comment.

Señor Johnson was at her side, pressing on her with boyish eagerness the sights of the place. She patted the stag hounds and inspected the garden. Then, confessing herself hungry, she obeyed with alacrity Sang's call to an early meal. At the table she ate coquettishly, throwing her birdlike side glances at the man opposite.

"I want to see a real cowboy," she announced, as she pushed her chair back.

"Why, sure!" cried Señor Johnson joyously. "Sang! hi, Sang! Tell Brent Palmer to step in here a minute."

After an interval the cowboy appeared, mincing in on his high-heeled boots, his silver spurs jingling, the fringe of his chaps impacting softly on the leather. He stood at ease, his broad hat in both hands, his dark, level brows fixed on his chief.

"Shake hands with Mrs. Johnson, Brent. I called you in because she said she wanted to see a real cowpuncher."

"Oh, Buck!" cried the woman.

For an instant the cowpuncher's level brows drew together. Then he caught the woman's glance fair. He smiled. "Well, I ain't much to look at," he proffered.

"That's not for you to say, sir," said Estrella, recovering.

"Brent, here, gentled your pony for you," exclaimed Señor Johnson.

"Oh," cried Estrella, "have I a pony? How nice. And it was so good of you, Mr. Brent. Can't I see him? I want to see him. I want to give him a piece of sugar." She fumbled in the bowl.

"Sure you can see him. I don't know as he'll eat sugar. He ain't that educated. Think you could teach him to eat

sugar, Brent?"

"I reckon," replied the cowboy.

They went out toward the corral, the cowboy joining them as a matter of course. Estrella demanded explanations as she went along. Their progress was leisurely. The blindfolded pump mule interested her.

"And he goes round and round that way all day without stopping, thinking he's really getting somewhere!" she marveled. "I think that's a shame! Poor old fellow, to get fooled that way!"

"It is some foolish," said Brent Palmer, "but he ain't any worse off than a cow pony that hikes out twenty mile and then twenty back."

"No, I suppose not," admitted Estrella.

"And we got to have water, you know," added Señor Johnson.

Brent rode up the sorrel bareback. The pretty animal, gentle as a kitten, nevertheless planted his forefeet strongly and snorted at Estrella.

"I reckon he ain't used to the sight of a woman," proffered the Señor, disappointed. "He'll get used to you, Go up to him soft-like and rub him between the eyes."

Estrella approached, but the pony jerked back his head with every symptom of distrust. She forgot the sugar she had intended to offer him.

"He's a perfect beauty," she said at last, "but, my! I'd never dare ride him. I'm awful scairt of horses."

"Oh, he'll come around all right," assured Brent easily. "I'll fix him."

"Oh, Mr. Brent," she exclaimed, "don't think I don't appreciate what you've done. I'm sure he's really just as gentle as he can be. It's only that I'm foolish."

"I'll fix him," repeated Brent.

The two men conducted her here and there, showing her the various institutions of the place. A man bent near the shed nailing a shoe to a horse's hoof.

"So you even have a blacksmith!" said Estrella. Her guides laughed amusedly.

"Tommy, come here!" called the Señor.

The horseshoer straightened up and approached. He was a lithe, curly-haired young boy, with a reckless, humorous eye and a smooth face, now red from bending over.

"Tommy, shake hands with Mrs. Johnson," said the Señor. "Mrs. Johnson wants to know if you're the blacksmith." He exploded in laughter.

"Oh, Buck!" cried Estrella again.

"No, ma'am," answered the boy directly; "I'm just tacking a shoe on Danger, here. We all does our own blacksmithing."

His roving eye examined her countenance respectfully, but with admiration. She caught the admiration and returned it, covertly but unmistakably, pleased that her charms were appreciated.

They continued their rounds. The sun was very hot and the dust deep. A woman would have known that these things distressed Estrella. She picked her way through the debris; she dropped her head from the burning; she felt her delicate garments moistening with perspiration, her hair dampening; the dust sifted up through the air. Over in the large corral a bronco buster, assisted by two of the cowboys, was engaged in roping and throwing some wild mustangs. The sight was wonderful, but here the dust billowed in clouds.

"I'm getting a little hot and tired," she confessed at last. "I think I'll go to

the house."

But near the shed she stopped again, interested in spite of herself by a bit of repairing Tommy had under way. The tire of a wagon wheel had been destroyed. Tommy was mending it. On the ground lay a fresh cowhide. From this Tommy was cutting a wide strip. As she watched he measured the strip around the circumference of the wheel.

"He isn't going to make a tire of that!" she exclaimed incredulously.

"Sure," replied Señor Johnson.

"Will it wear?"

"It'll wear for a month or so, till we can get another from town."

Estrella advanced and felt curiously of the rawhide. Tommy was fastening it to the wheel at the ends only.

"But how can it stay on that way?" she objected. "It'll come right off as soon as you use it."

"It'll harden on tight enough."

"Why?" she persisted. "Does it shrink much when it dries?"

Señor Johnson stared to see if she might be joking. "Does it shrink?" he repeated slowly. "There ain't nothing shrinks more, nor harder. It'll mighty nigh break that wood."

Estrella, incredulous, interested, she could not have told why, stooped again to feel the soft, yielding hide. She shook her head.

"You're joking me because I'm a tenderfoot," she accused brightly. "I know it dries hard, and I'll believe it shrinks a lot, but to break wood—that's piling it on a little thick."

"No, that's right, ma'am," broke in Brent Palmer. "It's awful strong. It pulls like a horse when the desert sun gets on it. You wrap anything up in a piece of that hide and see what happens. Some time you take and wrap a piece around a potato and put her out in the sun and see how it'll squeeze the water out of her."

"Is that so?" she appealed to Tommy. "I can't tell when they are making fun of me."

"Yes, ma'am, that's right," he assured her.

Estrella passed a strip of the flexible hide playfully about her wrists. "And if I let that dry that way I'd be handcuffed hard and fast," she said.

"It would cut you down to the bone," supplemented Brent Palmer.

She untwisted the strip, and stood looking at it, her eyes wide.

"I—I don't know why—" she faltered. "The thought makes me a little sick. Why, isn't it queer? Ugh! it's like a snake!" She flung it from her energetically and turned toward the ranch house.

Chapter Seven

Estrella

THE honeymoon developed and the necessary adjustments took place. The latter Señor Johnson had not foreseen, and yet, when the necessity for them arose, he acknowledged them right and proper.

"Course she don't want to ride over to Circle I with us," he informed his confidant, Jed Parker. "It's a long ride, and she ain't used to riding yet. Trouble is I've been thinking of doing things with her just as if she was a man. Women are different. They likes different things."

This second idea gradually overlaid the first in Señor Johnson's mind. Estrella showed little aptitude or interest in the rougher side of life. Her hus-

band's statement as to her being still unused to riding was distinctly a euphemism. Estrella never arrived at the point of feeling safe on a horse. In time she gave up trying, and the sorrel drifted back to cowpunching. The range work she never understood. As a spectacle it imposed itself on her interest for a week; but since she could discover no real and vital concern in the welfare of cows, soon the mere outward show became an old story.

Estrella's sleek nature avoided instinctively all that interfered with bodily well-being. When she was cool and well-fed and not thirsty, and surrounded by a proper degree of feminine daintiness, then she was ready to amuse herself. But she could not understand the desirability of those pleasures for which a certain price in discomfort must be paid. As for firearms, she confessed herself frankly afraid of them. That was the point at which her intimacy with them stopped.

The natural level to which these waters fell is easily seen. Quite simply, the Señor found that a wife does not enter fully into her husband's workaday life. The dreams he had dreamed did not come true.

This was at first a disappointment to him, of course, but the disappointment did not last. Señor Johnson was a man of sense, and he easily modified his first scheme of married life.

"She'd get sick of it, and I'd get sick of it," he formulated his new philosophy. "Now I got something to come back to, somebody to look forward to. And it's a *woman;* it ain't one of these darn gangle-leg cowgirls. The great thing is to feel you belong to someone, and that someone nice and cool and fresh and purty is waitin' for you when you come in tired. It beats that other little old idee of mine slick as a gun barrel."

So, during this, the busy season of the range riding, immediately before the great fall roundups, Señor Johnson rode abroad all day, and returned to his own hearth as many evenings of the week as he could. Estrella always saw him coming and stood in the doorway to greet him. He kicked off his spurs, washed and dusted himself. and spent the evening with his wife. He liked the sound of exactly that phrase, and was fond of repeating it to himself in a variety of connections.

"When I get in I'll spend the evening with my wife," "If I don't ride over to Circle I, I'll spend the evening with my wife," and so on. He had a good deal to tell her of the day's discoveries, the state of the range, and the condition of the cattle. To all of this she listened at least with patience. Señor Johnson, like most men who have long delayed marriage, was self-centered without knowing it. His interest in his mate had to do with her personality rather than with her doings.

"What you do with yourself all day today?" he occasionally inquired.

"Oh, there's lots to do," she would answer, a trifle listlessly; and this reply always seemed quite to satisfy his interest in the subject.

Señor Johnson, with a curiously instant transformation often to be observed among the adventurous, settled luxuriously into the state of being a married man. Its smallest details gave him distinct and separate sensations of pleasure.

"I plumb likes it all," he said. "I likes havin' interest in some fool geranium plant, and I likes worryin' about the screen doors and all the rest of the plumb foolishness. It does me good. It

feels like stretchin' your legs in front of a good warm fire."

The center, the compelling influence of this new state of affairs, was undoubtedly Estrella, and yet it is equally to be doubted whether she stood for more than the suggestion. Señor Johnson conducted his entire life with reference to his wife. His waking hours were concerned only with the thought of her, his every act revolved in its orbit controlled by her influence. Nevertheless she, as an individual human being, had little to do with it.

Señor Johnson referred his life to a state of affairs he had himself invented and which he called the married state, and to a woman whose attitude he had himself determined upon and whom he designated as his wife. The actual state of affairs—whatever it might be—he did not see; and the actual woman supplied merely the material medium necessary to the reality of his idea. Whether Estrella's eyes were interested or bored, bright or dull, alert or abstracted, contented or afraid, Señor Johnson could not have told you. He might have replied promptly enough—that they were happy and loving. That is the way Señor Johnson conceived a wife's eyes.

The routine of life, then, soon settled. After breakfast the Señor insisted that his wife accompany him on a short tour of inspection. "A little *pasear*," he called it, "just to get set for the day." Then his horse was brought, and he rode away on whatever business called him. Like a true son of the alkali, he took no lunch with him, nor expected his horse to feed until his return. This was an hour before sunset. The evening passed as has been described. It was all very simple.

When the business hung close to the ranch house—as in the bronco busting, the rebranding of bought cattle, and the like—he was able to share his wife's day. Estrella conducted herself dreamily, with a slow smile for him when his actual presence insisted on her attention. She seemed much given to staring out over the desert. Señor Johnson, appreciatively, thought he could understand this. Again, she gave much leisure to rocking back and forth on the low, wide veranda, her hands idle, her eyes vacant, her lips dumb. Susie O'Toole had early proved incompatible and had gone.

"A nice, contented, home sort of a woman," said Señor Johnson.

One thing alone besides the desert, on which she never seemed tired of looking, fascinated her. Whenever a beef was killed for the uses of the ranch, she commanded strips of the green skin. Then, like a child, she bound them and sewed them and nailed them to substances particularly susceptible to their constricting power. She choked the necks of green gourds, she indented the tender bark of cottonwood shoots, she expended an apparently exhaustless ingenuity on the fabrication of mechanical devices whose principle answered to the pulling of the drying rawhide. And always along the adobe fence could be seen a long row of potatoes bound in skin, some of them fresh and smooth and round, some sweating in the agony of squeezing; some wrinkled and dry and little, the last drops of life tortured out of them. Señor Johnson laughed goodhumoredly at these toys, puzzled to explain their fascination for his wife.

"They're sure an amusing enough contraption, honey," said he, "but what makes you stand out there in the hot sun staring at them that way? It's cool-

er on the porch."

"I don't know," said Estrella helplessly, turning her slow, vacant gaze on him. Suddenly she shivered in a strong physical revulsion. "I don't know!" she cried with passion.

After they had been married about a month Señor Johnson found it necessary to drive into Willets. "How would you like to go, too, and buy some duds?" he asked Estrella.

"Oh!" she cried strangely. "When?"

"Day after tomorrow."

The trip decided, her entire attitude changed. The vacancy of her gaze lifted; her movements quickened; she left off staring at the desert, and her rawhide toys were neglected. Before starting, Señor Johnson gave her a checkbook. He explained that there were no banks in Willets, but that Goodrich, the storekeeper, would honor her signature.

"Buy what you want to, honey," said he. "Tear her wide open. I'm good for it."

"How much can I draw?" she asked, smiling.

"As much as you want to," he replied with emphasis.

"Take care"—she poised before him with the checkbook extended—"I may draw—I might draw fifty thousand dollars."

"Not out of Goodrich," he grinned; "you'd bust the game. But hold him up for the limit, anyway."

He chuckled aloud, pleased at the rare, birdlike coquetry of the woman. They drove to Willets. It took them two days to go and two days to return. Estrella went through the town in a cyclone burst of enthusiasm, saw everything, bought everything, exhausted everything in two hours. Willets was not a large place. On her return to the ranch she sat down at once in the rocking-chair on the veranda. Her hands fell into her lap. She stared out over the desert.

Señor Johnson stole up behind her, clumsy as a playful bear. His eyes followed the direction of hers to where a cloud shadow lay across the slope, heavy, palpable, untransparent, like a blotch of ink.

"Pretty, isn't it, honey?" said he. "Glad to get back?"

She smiled at him her vacant, slow smile. "Here's my checkbook," she said; "put it away for me. I'm through with it."

"I'll put it in my desk," said he. "It's in the left-hand cubbyhole," he called from inside.

"Very well," she replied.

He stood in the doorway, looking fondly at her unconscious shoulders and the pose of her blond head thrown back against the high rocking-chair.

"That's the sort of a woman, after all," said Señor Johnson. "No blame fuss about her."

Chapter Eight

The Roundup

THIS, as you well may gather, was in the summer routine. Now the time of the great fall roundup drew near. The home ranch began to bustle in preparation.

All through Cochise County were short mountain ranges set down, apparently at random, like a child's blocks. In and out between them flowed the broad, plainlike valleys. On the valleys were the various ranges, great or small, controlled by the dif-

ferent individuals of the Cattlemen's Association. During the year an unimportant, but certain, shifting of stock took place. A few cattle of Señor Johnson's Lazy Y eluded the vigilance of his riders to drift over through the Grant Pass and into the ranges of his neighbor; equally, many of the neighbor's steers watered daily at Señor Johnson's troughs. It was a matter of courtesy to permit this, but one of the reasons for the fall roundup was a redistribution to the proper ranges. Each cattle owner sent an outfit to the scene of labor. The combined outfits moved slowly from one valley to another, cutting out the strays, branding the late calves, collecting for the owner of that particular range all his stock, that he might select his marketable beef. In turn each cattleman was host to his neighbors and their men.

This year it had been decided to begin the circle of the roundup at the C O Bar, near the banks of the San Pedro. Thence it would work eastward, wandering slowly in north and south deviation, to include all the country, until the final break-up would occur at the Lazy Y.

The Lazy Y crew was to consist of four men, thirty riding-horses, a chuck wagon, and cook. These, helping others, and receiving help in turn, would suffice, for in the roundup labor was pooled to a common end. With them would ride Jed Parker, to safeguard his master's interests.

For a week the punchers, in their daily rides, gathered in the range ponies. Señor Johnson owned fifty horses which he maintained at the home ranch for every-day riding, two hundred broken saddle animals, allowed the freedom of the range, except when special occasion demanded their use, and perhaps half a thousand quite unbroken – brood mares, stallions, young horses, broncos, and the like. At this time of year it was his habit to corral all those saddlewise in order to select horses for the roundups and to replace the ranch animals. The latter he turned loose for their turn at the freedom of the range.

The horses chosen, next the men turned their attention to outfit. Each had, of course, his saddle, spurs, and "rope." Of the latter the chuck wagon carried many extra. That vehicle, furthermore, transported such articles as the blankets, the tarpaulins under which to sleep, the running-irons for branding, the cooking layout, and the men's personal effects. All was in readiness to move for the six weeks' circle, when a complication arose. Jed Parker, while nimbly escaping an irritated steer, twisted the high heel of his boot on the corral fence. He insisted the injury amounted to nothing. Señor Johnson, however, disagreed.

"It don't amount to nothing, Jed," he pronounced after manipulation, "but she might make a good able-bodied injury with a little coaxing. Rest her a week and then you'll be all right."

"Rest her, the devil!" growled Jed; "who's going to San Pedro?"

"I will, of course," replied the Señor promptly. "Didje think we'd send the Chink?"

"I was first cousin to a Yaqui jackass for sendin' young Billy Ellis out. He'll be back in a week. He'd do."

"So'd the President," the Señor pointed out; "I hear he's had some experience."

"I hate to have you to go," objected Jed. "There's the missis." He shot a glance sideways at his chief.

"I guess she and I can stand it for a

week," scoffed the latter. "Why, we're old married folks by now. Besides, you can take care of her."

"I'll try," said Jed Parker, a little grimly.

Chapter Nine

The Long Trail

THE roundup crew started early the next morning, just about sunup. Señor Johnson rode first, merely to keep out of the dust. Then followed Tom Rich, jogging along easily in the cowpuncher's "Spanish trot," whistling soothingly to quiet the horses, giving a lead to the band of saddle animals strung out loosely behind him. These moved on gracefully and lightly in the manner of the unburdened plains horse, half decided to follow Tom's guidance, half inclined to break to right or left. Homer and Jim Lester flanked them, also riding in a slouch of apparent laziness, but every once in a while darting forward like bullets to turn back into the main herd certain individuals whom the early morning of the unwearied day had inspired to make a dash for liberty. The rear was brought up by Jerky Jones, the fourth cowpuncher, and the four-mule chuck wagon, lost in its own dust.

The sun mounted; the desert went silently through its changes. Wind devils raised straight, true columns of dust six, eight hundred, even a thousand feet into the air. The billows of dust from the horses and men crept and crawled with them like a living creature. Glorious color, magnificent distance, astonishing illusion, filled the world.

Señor Johnson rode ahead, looking at these things. The separation from his wife, brief as it would be, left room in his soul for the heart-hunger which beauty arouses in men. He loved the charm of the desert, yet it hurt him.

Behind him the punchers relieved the tedium of the march, each after his own manner. In an hour the bunch of loose horses lost its early-morning good spirits and settled down to a steady plodding that needed no supervision. Tom Rich led them, now, in silence, his time fully occupied in rolling Mexican cigarettes with one hand. The other three dropped back together and exchanged desultory remarks. Occasionally Jim Lester sang. It was always the same song of uncounted verses, but Jim had a strange fashion of singing a single verse at a time. After a long interval he would sing another.

"My love is a rider
And broncos he breaks,
But he's given up riding
And all for my sake,
For he found him a horse
And it suited him so
That he vowed he'd ne'er ride
Any other bronco!"

he warbled, and then in the same breath: "Say, boys, did you get onto the *pisano*-looking shorthorn at Willets last week?"

"Nope."

"He sifted in wearin' one of these hard-boiled hats, and carryin' a brogue thick enough to skate on. Says he wants a job drivin' team—that he drives a truck plenty back to St. Louis, where he comes from. Goodrich sets him behind them little pinto cavallos he has. Say! that son of a gun a driver! He couldn't drive nails in a snowbank." An expressive free-hand gesture told all there was to tell of the runaway.

"Th' shorthorn landed headfirst in Goldfish Charlie's horse trough. Charlie fishes him out. 'How the devil, stranger,' says Charlie, 'did you come to fall in here?' 'You blamed fool,' says the shorthorn, just cryin' mad. 'I didn't come to fall in here, I come to drive horses.' "

And then, without a transitory pause:

"Oh, my Love has a gun
And that gun he can use,
But he's quit his gun fighting
As well as his booze.
And he's sold him his saddle,
His spurs, and his rope,
And there's no more cowpunching
And that's what I hope."

The alkali dust, swirled back by a little breeze, billowed up and choked him. Behind, the mules coughed, their coats whitening with the powder. Far ahead in the distance lay the westerly mountains. They looked an hour away, and yet every man and beast in the outfit knew that hour after hour they were doomed, by the enchantment of the land, to plod ahead without apparently getting an inch nearer. The only salvation was to forget the mountains and to fill the present moment full of little things.

But Señor Johnson, today, found himself unable to do this. In spite of his best efforts he caught himself straining toward the distant goal, becoming impatient, trying to measure progress by landmarks—in short acting like a tenderfoot on the desert, who wears himself down and dies, not from the hardship, but from the nervous strain which he does not know how to avoid. Señor Johnson knew this as well as you and I. He cursed himself vigorously, and began with great resolution to think of something else.

He was aroused from this by Tom Rich, riding alongside. "Somebody coming, Señor," said he.

Señor Johnson raised his eyes to the approaching cloud of dust. Silently the two watched it until it resolved into a rider loping easily along. In fifteen minutes he drew rein, his pony dropped immediately from a gallop to immobility, he swung into a graceful at-ease attitude across his saddle, grinned amiably, and began to roll a cigarette.

"Billy Ellis," cried Rich.

"That's me," replied the newcomer.

"Thought you were down to Tucson?"

"I was."

"Thought you wasn't comin' back for a week yet?"

"Tommy," proffered Billy Ellis dreamily, "when you go to Tucson next you watch out until you sees a little, squint-eyed Britisher. Take a look at him. Then come away. He says he don't know nothin' about poker. Mebbe he don't, but he'll out-hold a warehouse."

But here Señor Johnson broke in: "Billy, you're just in time. Jed has hurt his foot and can't get on for a week yet. I want you to take charge. I got a lot to do at the ranch."

"Ain't got my war bag," objected Billy.

"Take my stuff. I'll send yours on when Parker goes."

"All right."

"Well, so long."

"So long, Señor."

They moved. The erratic Arizona breezes twisted the dust of their going. Señor Johnson watched them dwindle. With them seemed to go the joy in the old life. No longer did the long trail possess for him its ancient fascination. He had become a domestic man.

"And I'm glad of it," commented Señor Johnson.

The dust eddied aside. Plainly could be seen the swaying wagon, the loose-riding cowboys, the gleaming, naked backs of the herd. Then the veil closed over them again. But down the wind, faintly, in snatches, came the words of Jim Lester's song:

"Oh, Sam has a gun
That has gone to the bad,
Which makes poor old Sammy
Feel pretty damn sad,
For that gun it shoots high
And that gun it shoots low,
And it wabbles about
Like a bucking bronco!"

Señor Johnson turned and struck spurs to his willing pony.

Chapter Ten

The Discovery

SEÑOR BUCK JOHNSON loped quickly back toward the home ranch, his heart glad at this fortunate solution of his annoyance. The home ranch lay in plain sight not ten miles away. As Señor Johnson idly watched it shimmering in the heat, a tiny figure detached itself from the mass and launched itself in his direction.

"Wonder what's eating him!" marveled Señor Johnson, "—and who is it?"

The figure drew steadily nearer. In half an hour it had approached near enough to be recognized.

"Why, it's Jed!" cried the Señor, and spurred his horse. "What do you mean, riding out with that foot?" he demanded sternly, when within hailing-distance.

"Foot, hell!" gasped Parker, whirling his horse alongside. "Your wife's run away with Brent Palmer."

For fully ten seconds not the faintest indication proved that the husband had heard, except that he lifted his bridle hand, and the well-trained pony stopped.

"What did you say?" he asked finally.

"Your wife's run away with Brent Palmer," repeated Jed, almost with impatience.

Again the long pause.

"How do you know?" asked Señor Johnson, then.

"Know, hell! It's been going on for a month. Sang saw them drive off. They took the buckboard. He heard 'em planning it. He was too scairt to tell till they'd gone. I just found it out. They've been gone two hours. Must be going to make the Limited." Parker fidgeted, impatient to be off. "You're wasting time," he snapped at the motionless figure.

Suddenly Johnson's face flamed. He reached from his saddle to clutch Jed's shoulder, nearly pulling the foreman from his pony.

"You lie!" he cried. "You're lying to me! It ain't so!"

Parker made no effort to extricate himself from the painful grasp. His cool eyes met the blazing eyes of his chief.

"I wisht I did lie, Buck," he said sadly. "I wisht it wasn't so. But it is."

Johnson's head snapped back to the front with a groan. The pony snorted as the steel bit his flanks, leaped forward, and with head outstretched, nostrils wide, the wicked white of the bronco flickering in the corner of his eye, struck the beeline for the home ranch. Jed followed as fast as he was able.

On his arrival he found his chief

raging about the house like a wild beast. Sang trembled from a quick and stormy interrogatory in the kitchen. Chairs had been upset and let lie. Estrella's belongings had been tumbled over. Señor Johnson there found only too sure proof, in the various lacks, of a premeditated and permanent flight. Still he hoped; and as long as he hoped, he doubted, and the demons of doubt tore him to a frenzy. Jed stood near the door, his arms folded, his weight shifted to his sound foot, waiting and wondering what the next move was to be.

Finally, Señor Johnson, struck with a new idea, ran to his desk to rummage in a pigeonhole. But he found no need to do so, for lying on the desk was what he sought—the checkbook from which Estrella was to draw on Goodrich for the money she might need. He fairly snatched it open. Two of the checks had been torn out, stub and all. And then his eye caught a crumpled bit of blue paper under the edge of the desk.

He smoothed it out. The check was made out to bearer and signed Estrella Johnson. It called for fifteen thousand dollars. Across the middle was a great ink blot, reason for its rejection. At once Señor Johnson became singularly and dangerously cool.

"I reckon you're right, Jed," he cried in his natural voice. "She's gone with him. She's got all her traps with her, and she's drawn on Goodrich for fifteen thousand. And *she* never thought of going just this time of month when the miners are in with their dust, and Goodrich would be sure to have that much. That's friend Palmer. Been going on a month, you say?"

"I couldn't say anything, Buck," said Parker anxiously. "A man's never sure enough about them things till afterwards."

"I know," agreed Buck Johnson; "give me a light for my cigarette."

He puffed for a moment, then r— stretching his legs. In a moment he returned from the other room, the old shiny Colt's forty-five strapped loosely on his hip. Jed looked him in the face with some anxiety. The foreman was not deceived by the man's easy manner; in fact, he knew it to be symptomatic of one of the dangerous phases of Señor Johnson's character.

"What's up, Buck?" he inquired.

"Just going out for a *pasear* with the little horse, Jed."

"I suppose I better come along?"

"Not with your lame foot, Jed."

The tone of voice was conclusive. Jed cleared his throat.

"She left this for you," said he, proffering an envelope. "Them kind always writes."

"Sure," agreed Señor Johnson, stuffing the letter carelessly into his side pocket. He half drew the Colt's from its holster and slipped it back again. "Makes you feel plumb like a man to have one of these things rubbin' against you again," he observed irrelevantly. Then he went out, leaving the foreman leaning, chair tilted, against the wall.

Chapter Eleven

The Capture

ALTHOUGH he had left the room so suddenly, Señor Johnson did not at once open the gate of the adobe wall. His demeanor was gay, for he was a Westerner, but his heart was black. Hardly did he see beyond the convexity of his eyeballs.

The pony, warmed up by its little run,

pawed the ground, impatient to be off. It was a fine animal, clean-built, deep-chested, one of the mustang stock descended from the Arabs brought over by Pizzarro.

But Señor Johnson stood stock-still, his brain absolutely numb and empty. His hand brushed against something which fell to the ground. He brought his dull gaze to bear on it. The object proved to be a black, wrinkled spheroid, baked hard as iron in the sun—one of Estrella's toys, a potato squeezed to dryness by the constricting power of the rawhide. In a row along the fence were others. To Señor Johnson it seemed that thus his heart was being squeezed in the fire of suffering.

But the slight movement of the falling object roused him. He swung open the gate. The pony bowed his head delightedly. He was not tired, but his reins depended straight to the ground, and it was a point of honor with him to stand. At the saddle horn, in its sling, hung the riata, the "rope" without which no cowman ever stirs abroad, but which Señor Johnson had rarely used of late. Señor Johnson threw the reins over, seized the pony's mane in his left hand, held the pommel with his right, and so swung easily aboard, the pony's jump helping him to the saddle. Wheel tracks led down the trail. He followed them.

Truth to tell, Señor Johnson had very little idea of what he was going to do. His action was entirely instinctive. The wheel tracks held to the southwest, so he held to the southwest, too.

The pony hit his stride. The miles slipped by. After seven of them the animal slowed to a walk. Señor Johnson allowed him to get his wind, then spurred him on again.

About suppertime he came to the first ranch house. There he took a bite to eat and exchanged his horse for another, a favorite of his, named Button. The two men asked no questions.

"See Mrs. Johnson go through?" asked the Señor from the saddle.

"Yes, about three o'clock. Brent Palmer driving her. Bound for Willets to visit the preacher's wife, she said. Ought to catch up at the Circle I. That's where they'd all spend the night, of course. So long."

Señor Johnson knew now the couple would follow the straight road. They would fear no pursuit. He himself was supposed not to return for a week, and the story of visiting the minister's wife was not only plausible, it was natural. Jed had upset calculations, because Jed was shrewd, and had eyes in his head. Buck Johnson's first mental numbness was wearing away. He was beginning to think.

The night was very still and very dark, the stars very bright in their candlelike glow. The man, loping steadily on through the darkness, recalled that other night, equally still, equally dark, equally starry, when he had driven out from his accustomed life into the unknown with a woman by his side, the sight of whom asleep had made him feel "almost holy." He uttered a short laugh.

The pony was a good one, well equal to twice the distance he would be called upon to cover this night. Señor Johnson managed him well. By long experience and a natural instinct he knew just how hard to push his mount, just how to keep inside the point where too rapid exhaustion of vitality begins.

Toward the hour of sunrise he drew rein to look about him. The desert, till now wrapped in the thousand little

noises that make night silence, drew breath in preparation for the awe of the daily wonder. It lay across the world heavy as a sea of lead, and as lifeless; deeply unconscious, like an exhausted sleeper. The sky bent above, the stars paling. Far away the mountains seemed to wait. And then, imperceptibly, those in the east became blacker and sharper, while those in the west became faintly lucent and lost the distinctness of their outline. The change was nothing, yet everything. And suddenly a desert bird sprang into the air and began to sing.

Señor Johnson caught the wonder of it. The wonder of it seemed to him wasted, useless, cruel in its effect. He sighed impatiently, and drew his hand across his eyes.

The desert became gray with the first light before the glory. In the illusory revealment of it Señor Johnson's sharp frontiersman's eyes made out an object moving away from him in the middle distance. In a moment the object rose for a second against the sky line, then disappeared. He knew it to be the buckboard, and that the vehicle had just plunged into the dry bed of an arroyo.

Immediately life surged through him like an electric shock. He unfastened the riata from its sling, shook loose the noose, and moved forward in the direction in which he had last seen the buckboard.

At the top of the steep little bank he stopped behind the mesquite, straining his eyes; luck had been good to him. The buckboard had pulled up, and Brent Palmer was at the moment beginning a little fire, evidently to make the morning coffee.

Señor Johnson struck spurs to his horse and half slid, half fell, clattering, down the steep clay bank almost on top of the couple below.

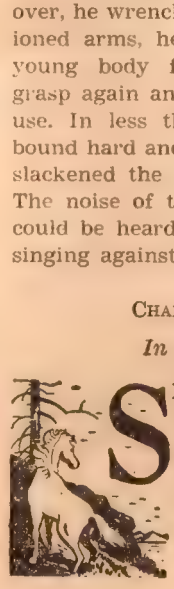
Estrella screamed. Brent Palmer jerked out an oath, and reached for his gun. The loop of the riata fell wide over him, immediately to be jerked tight, binding his arms tight to his side.

The bronco buster, swept from his feet by the pony's rapid turn, nevertheless struggled desperately to wrench himself loose. Button, intelligent at all rope work, walked steadily backward, step by step, taking up the slack, keeping the rope tight as he had done hundreds of times before when a steer had struggled as this man was struggling now. His master leaped from the saddle and ran forward. Button continued to walk slowly back. The riata remained taut. The noose held.

Brent Palmer fought savagely, even then. He kicked, he rolled over and over, he wrenched violently at his pinioned arms, he twisted his powerful young body from Señor Johnson's grasp again and again. But it was no use. In less than a minute he was bound hard and fast. Button promptly slackened the rope. The dust settled. The noise of the combat died. Again could be heard the single desert bird singing against the dawn.

Chapter Twelve

In the Arroyo



SENOR JOHNSON quietly approached Estrella. The girl had, during the struggle, gone through an aimless but frantic exhibition of terror. Now she shrank back, her eyes staring wildly, her hands behind her, ready to flop again over the brink of

hysteria.

"What are you going to do?" she demanded, her voice unnatural.

She received no reply. The man reached out and took her by the arm.

And then at once, as though the personal contact of the touch had broken through the last crumb of numbness with which shock had overlaid Buck Johnson's passions, the insanity of his rage broke out. He twisted her violently on her face, knelt on her back, and with the short piece of hard rope the cowboy always carries to "hog-tie" cattle, he lashed her wrists together. Then he arose panting, his square black beard rising and falling with the rise and fall of his great chest.

Estrella had screamed again and again until her face had been fairly ground into the alkali. There she had choked and strangled and gasped and sobbed, her mind nearly unhinged with terror. She kept appealing to him in a hoarse voice, but could get no reply, no indication that he had even heard. This terrified her still more. Brent Palmer cursed steadily and accurately, but the man did not seem to hear him either.

The tempest had broken in Buck Johnson's soul. When he had touched Estrella he had, for the first time, realized what he had lost. It was not the woman—her he despised. But the dreams! All at once he knew what they had been to him—he understood how completely the very substance of his life had changed in response to their slow soul-action. The new world had been blasted—the old no longer existed to which to return.

Buck Johnson stared at this catastrophe until his sight blurred. Why, it was atrocious! He had done nothing to deserve it! Why had they not left him peaceful in his own life of cattle and the trail? He had been happy. His dull eyes fell on the causes of the ruin.

And then, finally, in the understanding of how he had been tricked of his life, his happiness, his right to well-being, the whole force of the man's anger flared. Brent Palmer lay there cursing him artistically. That man had done it; that man was in his power. He would get even. How?

Estrella, too, lay huddled, helpless and defenseless, at his feet. She had done it. He would get even. How?

He had spoken no word. He spoke none now, either in answer to Estrella's appeals, becoming piteous in their craving for relief from suspense, or in response to Brent Palmer's steady stream of insults and vituperations. Such things were far below. The bitterness and anger and desolation were squeezing his heart. He remembered the silly little row of potatoes sewn in the green hide lying along the top of the adobe fence, some fresh and round, some dripping as the rawhide contracted, some black and withered and very small. A fierce and savage light sprang into his eyes.

Chapter Thirteen

The Rawhide

FIRST of all he unhitched the horses from the buckboard and turned them loose. Then, since he was early trained in Indian warfare, he dragged Palmer to the wagon wheel, and tied him so closely to it that he could not roll over. For, though the bronco buster was already so fettered that his only possible movement was of the jackknife variety, nevertheless

he might be able to hitch himself along the ground to a sharp stone, there to saw through the rope about his wrists. Estrella her husband held in contempt. He merely supplemented her wrist bands by one about the ankles.

Leisurely he mounted Button and turned up the wagon trail, leaving the two. Estrella had exhausted herself. She was capable of nothing more in the way of emotion. Her eyes tight closed, she inhaled in deep, trembling, long-drawn breaths, and exhaled with the name of her Maker.

Brent Palmer, on the contrary, was by no means subdued. He had expected to be shot in cold blood. Now he did not know what to anticipate. His black, level brows drawn straight in defiance, he threw his curses after Johnson's retreating figure.

The latter, however, paid no attention. He had his purposes. Once at the top of the arroyo he took a careful survey of the landscape, now rich with dawn. Each excrescence on the plain his half-squinted eyes noticed, and with instant skill relegated to its proper category of soapweed, mesquite, cactus. At length he swung Button in an easy lope toward what looked to be a bunch of soapweed in the middle distance.

But in a moment the cattle could be seen plainly. Button pricked up his ears. He knew cattle. Now he proceeded tentatively, lifting high his little hoofs to avoid the half-seen inequalities of the ground and the ground's growths, wondering whether he were to be called on to rope or to drive. When the rider had approached to within a hundred feet, the cattle started. Immediately Button understood that he was to pursue. No rope swung above his head, so he sheered off and ran as fast as he could to cut ahead of the bunch. But his rider with knee and rein forced him in. After a moment, to his astonishment, he found himself running alongside a big steer. Button had never hunted buffalo—Buck Johnson had.

The Colt's forty-five barked once, and then again. The steer staggered, fell to his knees, recovered, and finally stopped, the blood streaming from his nostrils. In a moment he fell heavily on his side—dead.

Señor Johnson at once dismounted and began methodically to skin the animal. This was not easy, for he had no way of suspending the carcass nor of rolling it from side to side. However, he was practiced at it and did a neat job. Two or three times he even caught himself taking extra pains that the thin flesh strips should not adhere to the inside of the pelt. Then he smiled grimly, and ripped it loose.

After the hide had been removed he cut from the edge, around and around, a long, narrow strip. With this he bound the whole into a compact bundle, strapped it on behind his saddle, and remounted. He returned to the arroyo.

Estrella still lay with her eyes closed. Brent Palmer looked up keenly. The bronco buster saw the green hide. A puzzled expression crept across his face.

Roughly Johnson loosed his enemy from the wheel and dragged him to the woman. He passed the free end of the riata about them both, tying them close together. The girl continued to moan, out of her wits with terror.

"What are you going to do now, you devil?" demanded Palmer, but received no reply.

Buck Johnson spread out the rawhide. Putting forth his huge strength,

he carried to it the pair, bound together like a bale of goods, and laid them on its cool surface. He threw across them the edges, and then deliberately began to wind around and around the huge and unwieldly rawhide package the strip he had cut from the edge of the pelt.

Nor was this altogether easy. At last Brent Palmer understood. He writhed in the struggle of desperation, foaming blasphemies. The uncouth bundle rolled here and there. But inexorably the other, from the advantage of his position, drew the thongs tighter.

And then, all at once, from vituperation the bronco buster fell to pleading, not for life, but for death.

"For God's sake, shoot me!" he cried from within the smothering folds of the rawhide. "If you ever had a heart in you, shoot me! Don't leave me here to be crushed in this vise. You wouldn't do that to a yellow dog. An Injin wouldn't do that, Buck. It's a joke, isn't it? Don't go away an' leave me, Buck. I've done you dirt. Cut my heart out, if you want to; I won't say a word, but don't leave me here for the sun—"

His voice was drowned in a piercing scream, as Estrella came to herself and understood. Always the rawhide had possessed for her an occult fascination and repulsion. She had never been able to touch it without a shudder, and yet she had always been drawn to experiment with it. The terror of her doom had now added to it for her all the vague and premonitory terrors which heretofore she had not understood.

The richness of the dawn had flowed to the west. Day was at hand. Breezes had begun to play across the desert; the wind devils to raise their straight columns. A first long shaft of sunlight shot through a pass in the Chiricahuas, trembled in the dust-moted air, and laid its warmth on the rawhide. Señor Johnson roused himself from his gloom to speak his first words of the episode.

"There, damn you!" said he. "I guess you'll be close enough together now!"

He turned away to look for his horse.

Chapter Fourteen

The Desert

BUTTON was a trusty of Señor Johnson's private animals. He was never known to leave his master in the lurch, and so was habitually allowed certain privileges. Now, instead of remaining exactly on the spot where he was "tied to the ground," he had wandered out of the dry arroyo bed to the upper level of the plains, where he knew certain bunch grasses might be found. Buck Johnson climbed the steep wooded bank in search of him.

The pony stood not ten feet distant. At his master's abrupt appearance he merely raised his head, a wisp of grass in the corner of his mouth, without attempting to move away. Buck Johnson walked confidently to him, fumbling in his side pocket for the piece of sugar with which he habitually soothed Button's sophisticated palate. His hand encountered Estrella's letter. He drew it out and opened it.

Dear Buck, it read, *I am going away. I tried to be good, but I can't. It's too lonesome for me. I'm afraid of the horses and the cattle and the men and the desert. I hate it all. I tried to make you see how I felt about it, but you couldn't seem to see. I know you'll never forgive me, but I'd go crazy here.*

I'm almost crazy now. I suppose you think I'm a bad woman, but I am not. You won't believe that. It's true though. The desert would make anyone bad. I don't see how you stand it. You've been good to me, and I've really tried, but it's no use. The country is awful. I never ought to have come. I'm sorry you are going to think me a bad woman, for I like you and admire you, but nothing, nothing could make me stay here any longer. She signed herself simply *Estrella Sands*, her maiden name.

Buck Johnson stood staring at the paper for a much longer time than was necessary merely to absorb the meaning of the words. His senses, sharpened by the stress of the last sixteen hours, were trying mightily to cut to the mystery of a change going on within himself. The phrases of the letter were bald enough, yet they conveyed something vital to his inner being. He could not understand what it was.

Then abruptly he raised his eyes.

Before him lay the desert, but a desert suddenly and miraculously changed, a desert he had never seen before. Mile after mile it swept away before him, hot, dry, suffocating, lifeless. The sparse vegetation was gray with the alkali dust. The heat hung choking in the air like a curtain. Lizards sprawled in the sun, repulsive. A rattlesnake dragged its loathsome length from under a mesquite. The dried carcass of a steer, whose parchment skin drew tight across its bones, rattled in the breeze. Here and there rock ridges showed with the obscenity of so many skeletons, exposing to the hard, cruel sky the earth's nakedness. Thirst, delirium, death, hovered palpable in the wind; dreadful, unconquerable, ghastly.

The desert showed her teeth and lay in wait like a fierce beast. The little soul of man shrank in terror before it.

Buck Johnson stared, recalling the phrases of the letter, recalling the words of his foreman, Jed Parker. "*It's too lonesome for me,*" "*I'm afraid,*" "*I hate it all,*" "*I'd go crazy here,*" "*The desert would make anyone bad,*" "*The country is awful.*" And the musing voice of the old cattleman, "*I wonder if she'll like the country!*" They reiterated themselves over and over; and always as refrain his own confident reply, "*Like the country? Sure! Why shouldn't she?*"

And then he recalled the summer just passing, and the woman who had made no fuss. Chance remarks of hers came back to him, remarks whose meaning he had not at the time grasped, but which now he saw were desperate appeals to his understanding. He had known his desert. He had never known hers.

With an exclamation Buck Johnson turned abruptly back to the arroyo. Button followed him, mildly curious, certain that his master's reappearance meant a summons for himself.

Down the miniature cliff the man slid, confidently, without hesitation, sure of himself. His shoulders held squarely, his step elastic, his eye bright, he walked to the fearful, shapeless bundle now lying motionless on the flat surface of the alkali.

Brent Palmer had fallen into a grim silence, but Estrella still moaned. The cattleman drew his knife and ripped loose the bonds. Immediately the flaps of the wet rawhide fell apart, exposing to the new daylight the two bound together. Buck Johnson leaned over to touch the woman's shoulder.

"Estrella," said he gently.

Her eyes came open with a snap, and

stared into his, wild with the surprise of his return.

"Estrella," he repeated, "how old are you?"

She gulped down a sob, unable to comprehend the purport of his question. "How old are you, Estrella?" he repeated again.

"Twenty-one," she gasped finally.

"Ah!" said he.

He stood for a moment in deep thought, then began methodically, without haste, to cut loose the thongs that bound the two together.

When the man and the woman were quite freed, he stood for a moment, the knife in his hand, looking down on them. Then he swung himself into the saddle and rode away, straight down the narrow arroyo, out beyond its lower widening, into the vast plains the hither side of the Chiricahuas. The alkali dust was snatched by the wind from beneath his horse's feet. Smaller and smaller he dwindled, rising and falling, rising and falling in the monotonous cow pony's lope. The heat shimmer veiled him for a moment, but he reappeared. A mirage concealed him, but he emerged on the other side of it. Then suddenly he was gone. The desert had swallowed him up. THE END

BEARDED KIBITZER

THERE WERE all kinds of ways to make a living in the gold-fevered camps of the Mother Lode, most of them involving physical labor of one kind or another. In the case of a fellow named Kroger, however, this hard fact did not hold true.

Kroger was an enigma to the miners who thronged the fandango halls and gambling-houses for their relaxation. He toiled not, neither did he spin, yet he always seemed well-nourished and well-dressed. His severely plain clothes and green-persimmon expression gave him the look of an itinerant parson, and his great, full beard was invariably tucked inside his collar. It made him hot, but it kept the beard clean.

Kroger's only pastime seemed to consist of wandering about the gaming-tables—never taking a hand, just moving from one table to another as he watched the play. The fact that nuggets and gold coins disappeared from the players' piles coincident with Kroger's spectator rounds seemed only coincidence until Kroger made an error in judgment one night.

The miner who had missed several eight-sided gold slugs, worth fifty dollars each by mining-camp standards, shortly after Kroger had stood by his elbow was understandably annoyed when it happened to him again the same night. Kroger was moving away from the table in his methodical way when the miner had an inspiration. He sprang to his feet, seized Kroger by the shoulder, spun him around, and snatched the luxuriant beard from its environing collar. As he did so a shower of nuggets and coins scattered over the floor.

The miners' jury that convened on the spot made a Solomon-like decision. Some of them wanted to cut Kroger's hands off at the wrists, but the majority overruled this sanguinary proposal. Kroger's beard was shaved down to the skin, if not a little deeper. It was figured that he would have to work for a living at least until his beard grew out again. Then, in the interests of permanent self-protection, they invited Kroger to move along down the trail and grow his beard someplace else.

—W. H. HUTCHINSON

Free-for-All

WHEN "Twin Sombreros," the Zane Grey story reprinted in this issue, was first published in book form it called forth the encomiums which regularly greeted the appearance of each new novel by Mr. Grey. One reviewer commented that it was "made up of the same ingredients as previous successes, mixed with a professional skill born of long practice." Another opined that the book had "everything you could ask in a Zane Grey story."

Those two quotations sum up "Twin Sombreros" pretty accurately. The ingredients and the storytelling ability Mr. Grey always possessed; by the time he wrote "Twin Sombreros" he had, moreover, developed his skill to a high degree, so that while it is less grim and stark than some of his earlier novels, it has the same elements of fast-developing plot and zestful action, now accompanied by a narrative style at perhaps its most mature. The story is, in a sense, a sequel to "Knights of the Range," at least to the extent that Brazos Keene, one of the principal characters in that yarn, now appears as the hero of this one.

● Tom W. Blackburn's "The Heretic," is an unusual Western indeed—the story of a man who, having once lived by the gun, has forsworn its use—but not the principles by which he has always guided his actions. Such a situation may naturally lead to trouble on the raw frontier—it does in this case, which is why there is a story—but Roy Durand proves that a gun is just a gun: a thing for man to use, not for him to be mastered by.

● "Hell Was Never So Snug" is a title at once striking and savory, and it introduces a tale that is as full of suspense and drama as any we have read in a long time. Author Giff Cheshire did himself proud on this one—the way Giff keeps on improving makes us pret-

ty sure that someday he's going to be right up there with the very best in the Western business.

● "Cupid Can Be Stupid" continues the "Paintin' Pistoleer" saga—no doubt all that needs to be said about the yarn itself. Feeling that the readers of ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE would be interested in learning something of the why and wherefore of this popular series, we invited author Walker A. (Two-Gun) Tompkins to please explain—if possible. His reply:

"The 'Paintin' Pistoleer' is an actual person. I first ran across him in a ward tent of an army hospital on the English Channel coast, shortly after D-Day. He was a G. I. with a hunk of shrapnel in his back, and was one of the first casualties I interviewed for the statewide press in my role as an army correspondent attached to the medics. This little Pfc aspired to be an artist and carried his painting tools in his barracks bag. When I asked him his name he said, 'Oh, I'm just another Smith,' in a soft, pleasant Alabama drawl.

"He was working on a sketch of an Arizona sunrise, and it turned out his ambition was someday to go west and paint. Two years later, when I had swapped the stripes on my sleeve for stripes on my necktie, that D-Day casualty became the genesis for Justin Other Smith, the 'Paintin' Pistoleer.'

"My fictional Apache and its characters are a composite of all the Western cow towns and characters I have visited through the years I've spent as a yarn-spinner. Go to any two-bit cow town off the beaten tourist tracks today and you'll find Rimfire Cudd, Sol Fishman, and the others of the PP series gathered on some shady bench, whittlin' and spittin' tobacco juice and spinning tales in the same vernacular I use for these stories.

"Rimfire Cudd is the marshal of a small Nevada town whose name I won't mention—vainglorious, bragging, a rotten shot. Curly Bill Grane tends bar at a saloon down across the Rio Grande—or did the last time I dropped into his deadfall for a glass of buttermilk. You'll find the counterpart of Sol Fishman in a Wyoming town and that of Lew Pirtle (who in his role of a telegrapher was unknowingly the first 'broadcasting station' in his community) in a real Arizona town. Plato X. Scrounge exists in real life in a Montana railroad town, where he chases ambulances and serves as 'justice of the pieces.' You'll find the militant feminists of the Ladies' Knittin' and Peach Presarves Society in almost any small American town today.

"Ten years ago a movie director could have assembled the entire cast of the Paintin' Pistoleer series from real life—unschooled veterans of the Old West that will never live again. They're dropping off fast, these frontier characters. I get a big kick out of perpetuating their flare for tall-tale spinning in the pages of ZGWM."

● "The Long Chase" is fact-featurist Gene Hammond's second appearance in ZGWM, and we hope and expect he will eventually become one of our best-known contributors. He writes about himself: "Born in Denver twenty-seven years ago, I discovered during my undergraduate days at Stanford that no place in the country held more appeal for me than the San Francisco Peninsula. Therefore, having served three years in Africa and Italy as ambulance driver, NCO, and finally lieutenant with the American Field Serv-

ice, followed by a year in Rome as assistant director of a refugee-aid committee (helped by my wife, who joined me in Italy at the cessation of hostilities), I returned to the U. S. by way of China to settle in Palo Alto. During the past two years I have been devoting myself to learning the intricacies of parenthood (we have one daughter, Jane, born in October, 1947) and digging out colorful tales of the early days of California and the surrounding Western states."

May your digging continue fruitful, Gene! (We're happy to say that Gene is now busy writing another exciting article, which should be appearing in ZGWM soon.)

● The late Stewart Edward White regarded "The Rawhide," reprinted in this issue, as his "most coherent" piece of work. We have long wanted to feature it as a Western classic, but its length has been somewhat of a problem. Now, however, having recently been urged to make it available for ZGWM readers, we present it with the confidence that they will enjoy to the full this bitter-sweet masterpiece of Western writing.

Coming in the April ZGWM: The Zane Grey story will be the magazine abridgment of "The Rainbow Trail," sequel to the ever-popular "Riders of the Purple Sage"—curious readers will discover what happened to Jim Lassiter and Jane Withersteen, and to Fay Larkin, following the fall of Balancing Rock. Leading the short-story bunch will be "Saddlemates," a memorable story by Les Savage, Jr., whose first novel, "Treasure of the Brasada," is an absolute must for all Western fans. Add a dramatic John E. Kelly tale with an Old-West-railroading setting, a humorous yarn by old ZGWM favorite Joe Hook, and a fine assortment of other fact and fiction pieces—yessir, count on good reading ahead!

—THE EDITORS.

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THEY WERE RUGGED

THE AMERICAN LOGGER of the early days has been too often overlooked. Reams have been written about the other pioneers of the West—cowboys, Indian fighters, even railroad builders—but the logger, as much a pioneer as any of them, has received far less favorable notice. Yet he played a vital part in the development of the West.

The pure logger strain came into being about three hundred years ago back in Maine; old-timers are saying that now it is passing out of existence in the Pacific Northwest. The early loggers were tough and rugged—hard-working, hard-fighting, hard-drinking men. The ones who rode the logs down the river (pictured here) were called "white-water men." They were like cats on those logs—just "good on the river." This was hard, dangerous work, calling for great skill and endurance. If a man fell into that foaming water amidst thousands of churning logs, there was little hope of getting out alive. The logger rates pretty close to the top of the list of iron men of the Old West.

NICK FIRFIRES

CLOSING IN Painted by Earl Sherwan